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From the Editors

In June 2025, Budapest witnessed the largest pride parade in its history. According to competing estimates, between one and two hundred thousand people gathered in the Hungarian capital in response to, and defiance of, the country's government, which a few months earlier had passed a law banning the "promotion of homosexuality" in front of minors. Since the law specifically sought to put an end to Budapest Pride, substantial protest already had erupted in April in the form of an ironic "Gray Pride," mocking President Viktor Orbán's authoritarian homophobic campaign with flags that replaced the familiar rainbow with monochromatic shades of gray.

These events are paradigmatic for queer experiences around the world, including Central and Eastern Europe, where rulers such as Orbán and Vladimir Putin have declared the LGBTQ+ community the national enemy and where queer people nonetheless continue to organize and staunchly hold on to their culture, which finds ever new outlets in literature, film, art, music, and digital media. In the summer of 2024, when we decided to launch SQS, we intended for it to lend further visibility to the issues and creative forces of the pertinent region's LGBTQ+ individuals and communities today and across history.

Indeed, when Russia first introduced the law now widely known as the "Gay Propaganda Law" (imitated by Orbán and autocrats elsewhere), it referred to the prohibited not explicitly as homosexuality, but merely as "non-traditional sexual relations." Consequently, the law not only provided a foundation for wide-ranging and, potentially, arbitrary censorship. It also made an ignorant claim about history and culture—namely, that non-heterosexual sexuality and expressions of gender beyond a conventional, hierarchical binary are foreign to the national tradition.

By declaring a rich cultural heritage alien, politicized homophobia proposes grayness instead of gayness, gender and sexual uniformity instead of the historical reality of trans and queer people that has a verifiable cultural record. The task of our journal as we see it is to engage with this dimension of Central and Eastern European cultures through scholarly articles and forum essays, and to amplify the existent record by publishing translations of original source texts, reviews, and a chronicle of events. Many scholars around the world are currently contributing to the thriving field of Queer Studies focused on the Slavic region, and we anticipate, with considerable enthusiasm, their participation in SQS.

At the same time, our own academic world, albeit sheltered from many of the harsh realities that LGBTQ+ people experience elsewhere, is facing its own challenges regarding scholarship in Queer Studies. In Ohio, where we reside, a recently introduced new law seeks to regulate, *inter alia*, the teaching of "controversial belief and policy" and prohibits "diversity, equity, and inclusion offices or departments." In compliance with

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the law, The Ohio State University recently shut down its LGBTQ+ resource website. And while the content of teaching and research so far has been left untouched, fears are rising here, as elsewhere, that more and possibly worse may come.

To maintain integrity on multiple fronts, from the outset we agreed to keep *SQS* autonomous, unaffiliated with any institution. We envisioned *SQS* as the collective effort of a community free from academic censorship and volatile state support. Accordingly, the journal is hosted independently online, embracing what, optimally, will be a long and vibrantly unrestricted existence. As editors we welcome submissions from colleagues who conceive of Queer Studies in a kindred vein.

Philip Tuxbury-Gleissner and Helena Goscilo

Queer Shame, Queer Love

Julie A. Cassiday, Williams College

The launching of SQS feels like a party for which many of us have waited a very long time. When invited to join the journal's celebration of queer culture in Central and Eastern Europe as a member of its editorial board, I immediately RSVPed "yes!" I then found myself facing the question that all scholars of things queer must sooner or later answer: What do I mean when I use the word "queer" and how do I understand the queerness I study? Given that I have spent some thirty years studying Russian culture in various guises, I hoped I would quickly come up with an answer. However, I found imagining an outfit for the SQS party much easier than responding to the question of what queer is. All of the brave people who arrived at this particular party before me—from Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and José Muñoz to my esteemed colleagues on the SQS editorial board—agree that queerness resists not only heteronormativity, but also definition, so who am I to tread where even they feared to go?

I wondered whether the invitation I so eagerly accepted might have come to the wrong person, and I even considered simply stringing together all of the rich non-definitions of queerness that have inspired me over the years. Confronting a mild case of the imposter syndrome, I suddenly realized that my self-doubt in fact demonstrates the very queerness that I study and perform on a daily basis as a lesbian who earns her living by ventriloquizing for students the heteronormativity of Tolstoy et al., or inculcating in them the Russian language's relentlessly gendered grammar. In other words, I have spent many years of my queer life in a struggle to grasp and teach material, much of which ignores or denies essential aspects of myself. However, this queer relationship to both the culture I study and its language has not just left me in a morass of self-doubt. Rather, the small, repeated humiliations that come from my eccentricity in relation to what I study have taught me a great deal of humility, something, as Dostoevsky's finest protagonists illustrate, we only learn thanks to humiliation and shame—that most powerful affect.

My recognition of the shame that has shaped my own queer career brought me back to Butler and Sedgwick, both of whom argued that queerness happens whenever subjectivity forms around shame (Butler 2013, Sedgwick 2003). And given that shame, like subjectivity itself, comes into being in discrete individuals located in specific times and places, the experience of shame varies in response to the social and cultural context where it arises. The variability of shame suggests that it might function as a portable analytic for understanding queerness in situations far beyond the United States of the 1990s, where and when Butler and Sedgwick first wrote about shame as the *sine qua non* of queerness. Moreover, this not-quite-definition of queer proves particularly applicable

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in the case of Russia, a country that has repeatedly shamed its LGBTQ+ citizens throughout its modern history. We need only remember Peter the Great's 1716 ban on sex between men in the Russian military, the criminalization of sodomy by Nikolai I in the 1832, its recriminalization in 1934 by Stalin's fiat, Putin's initial "gay propaganda" law of 2013, its revision into the anti-LGBTQ+ law of 2022, and the Russian Supreme Court's declaration in 2023 of "the international LGBT organization" as "extremist" to realize that Russians who challenge heteronormativity have long been a dumping ground for their country's shame and abjection. As we now know, the last three of these events has led to a rise in homophobic violence within, as well as a wave of LGBTQ+ migration and asylum from, Russia (Kondakov 2017, Mole 2021). However, Putin's efforts to transform LGBTQ+ Russians into the country's internal enemy have eliminated neither Russian queerness nor Russian shame. On the contrary, the homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia sanctioned by the final three decrees in my list have created an ever-expanding web of queerness, which requires increasingly aggressive and violent efforts to detect and destroy it. The very timing of the two anti-LGBTQ+ laws betrays the link between Putin's political homophobia and the Ukrainophobia driving his imperial aggression: the "gay propaganda" law came into effect less than a year before the 2014 seizure of Crimea, while the anti-LGBTQ+ law was passed not even a year after the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Put differently, shame represents a particularly relevant criterion for queerness when we consider Russia, where queerness has never been just a question of personal identity or private sexual practice, but rather a shameful offence that inevitably plays out on the public stage of politics. Moreover, the queer identity generated by shame represents a peculiar mash-up of both performative and ontological notions of identity. Even though we might accrue shame and cast it off through what we say and do, repeated shame stigmatizes us, marking our very core as queer. Russian queers live with this double burden of shame, which reproaches them for having been "born this way" at the same time that it blames them for infecting others with their queer contagion. In the case of Russia the tension between ontological and performative queerness has led to a series of striking paradoxes: queerness is simultaneously nowhere yet everywhere, and the word "queer" applies to no one yet everyone, depending on our point of view. If, for example, Putin's homophobia mobilizes a queerness that is invisible to the naked eye yet always in its sights, then those Russians who dare to represent queerness as more than contagion and stigma create works with the power to undermine his paranoid imperial ambition by transforming the humiliation on which this ambition depends into a humility with the power to protect and sustain queer lives.

To illustrate my point, I would like to turn to two recent works of fiction, originally published in Russian, which show what happens when queerness is reduced to contagion and stigma, as well as what it might take to transform queer humiliation into humility. Unsurprisingly, both works have fallen prey to censorship in the Russian Federation due to their vivid portrayals of queerness. However, neither qualifies as fine literature or high art. Rather, the works I have in mind come from pop culture, and both represent a

subgenre of popular romance called “boys love” or BL. Written primarily by women for women, BL imagines the romantic and sexual attraction of young men, and since its birth in shoujo manga of the 1970s, it has left Japan and swept across the globe, inspiring avid fandoms from South Korea, China, Thailand, and the Philippines to Europe, Latin America, North America, and Russia.¹ Whether those writing and consuming Russophone BL consider themselves LGBTQ+ or not, their love of a genre that reimagines male homosociality as homosexuality makes them queer in the Russian context, as do the venues where they write and read BL: popular manga portals (MintManga, Tapas, Webtoon, and Patreon) and Ficbook.ru, the largest Russophone fanfiction website. Judging by their fans’ enthusiastic reactions, both the webcomic *im | mortal* and the novel *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* offer compelling depictions of how the traumatized queer subjectivity created by homophobic shaming in Russia might open up to humility, compassion, and even love.

I begin with *im | mortal*, the creation of the artist koriandr, since, as a webcomic with only a few of several volumes completed and available online, its serialized story has yet to reach its climax.² Set in a magical past, *im | mortal* draws on the narrative and visual canon of Russian fairy tales. However, koriandr recasts the archetypal antagonist and protagonist of many *skazki*, Koshchei the Deathless and Ivan Tsarevich, by placing them in a landscape of relentless violence and cruelty. Rather than setting out on a quest for magical animals or a beautiful bride, *im | mortal*’s version of the tsar’s third son finds himself surrounded by wraiths and monsters and already imprisoned in Koshchei’s castle, where he submits to the deathless demon’s sexual abuse in exchange for his sister’s freedom. Like other examples of BL that focus on non-consensual sex, *im | mortal* vividly paints an erotic bond that transforms foes into lovers, at the same time showing how a relationship that begins with sadistic domination and humiliating submission might eventually heal deep traumas of the past through what looks like their repetition.

koriandr’s dynamic drawings hark back to Russian folk art generally and more specifically to early-twentieth-century fairy-tale illustrations, most notably by Ivan Bilibin. *im | mortal* uses the vivid patterns and colors of her predecessors to draw readers into early scenes of the captive Ivan’s growing terror before the all-powerful Koshchei. The Tsarevich’s unblemished white skin, tousled yellow curls, blue eyes agape, and slim, cringing frame stand in high contrast to Koshchei’s glowering grey visage, long black tresses, diabolical eyes whose pupils shift from light blue to white and then gold, and

¹ For overviews of the genre of BL, see McLelland and Welker 2015, Welker 2022. Although little has been published on Russophone BL, two articles by Yuliia Tarasiuk discuss Russophone BL manga and BL fandom in Russia (Tarasiuk 2020 and 2022).

² A censored version of *im | mortal* is available on both Webtoon at https://www.webtoons.com/en/canvas/immortal/list?title_no=410499 and Tapas at https://tapas.io/series/im_mortal/info. The Russian-language site MintManga also appears to host *im | mortal* at https://2.mintmanga.one/bes_smertnyi_A5327; however, I have never been able to access the full webtoon probably due to either to firewalls or its removal from the platform. The full uncensored version is available only on Patreon via subscription at https://www.patreon.com/c/koriandr_art/posts. Interestingly, the first volume of *im | mortal* was published as a hardcover book by Eksmo in 2023, which subsequently discontinued the series (koriandr 2023).

imposing, well-muscled form. When taken with the demon's pointed ears pierced by multiple spikes, vampirish fangs, claw-like fingernails, flowing black robes, and stiletto boots, Koshchei looks more like a sexy dominatrix in koriandr's rendering than the repulsive old man of earlier fairy-tale illustrators (figure 1). Drawing equally on the visual vocabularies of *skazki* and BDSM, koriandr prepares readers for Ivan's eventual submission to the cruel, yet seductive Koshchei, as well as the cracks that soon appear in the latter's ruthless façade as the two grow closer.

im | mortal deliberately shocks readers with Ivan and Koshchei's first sexual encounter by painting it as a ruthless and bloody rape (figure 2).³ Yet during Koshchei's approach to Ivan, which happens only after the tsarevich has agreed to become his sexual plaything, koriandr introduces a new color palate into *im | mortal*, transforming both what and how this sex between a mortal man and immortal monster means. Surprisingly, Koshchei hesitates to take advantage of the now compliant Ivan, who meekly begs for mercy, pleading, "Please, please. . ."⁴ At this point, the demon's memory carries him and the reader back to a similar moment in the distant past, when a young Koshchei uttered the very same words. Drawn in tones of sepia, brown, grey, and black, the immortal fiend's mortal backstory slowly emerges. Brought to Russian lands as a slave himself and knowing barely a word of Russian, the young Koshchei found protection in service to a seemingly benevolent nobleman, only to fall victim to this new master's sexual abuse. Recalling these traumatic memories transforms not only Koshchei's attitude towards the tsarevich cowering before him, but also the reader's understanding of a character we might mistake for the embodiment of pure evil. Koshchei's momentary identification with the young tsarevich he plans to rape triggers repeatedly his own memory of childhood abuse, which, we now understand, made a once



Figure 1. Two frames from koriandr's webcomic *im|mortal* representing the encounter between Ivan and Koshchei as both threatening and seductive.

³ The rape takes place in episodes 9 and 10.

⁴ Ivan speaks these words towards the end of episode 10.



Figure 2. Frame from koriandr's webcomic *im/mortal* depicting the violent rape of Ivan by Koshchei.

vulnerable and human boy into the fearsome Koshchei now towering over Ivan. Just as important, the fleeting moments of empathy for his victim suspend, if only temporarily, the humiliation to which Koshchei subjects the tsarevich. We now recognize that Koshchei's desire to humiliate Ivan is little more than an attempt to cast off his own childhood sexual shame, and the compassion we initially felt only for the trembling tsarevich begins to extend to his traumatized tormentor.

Although koriandr has yet to bring *im | mortal*'s story to its conclusion, the artist has clearly indicated that the momentary lapses in Koshchei's cruelty will ultimately lead to a "love that was born against all odds" (koriandr n.d.). Those within BL's fandom readily recognize in the episodes of *im | mortal* published to date many of the genre's tropes: as the slash in the webcomic's title suggests, Koshchei and Ivan represent vivid examples of BL's requisite "seme/uke" pairing ("attacker/receiver" or "top/bottom" in Japanese), as well as a "hair contrast duo" (brunette vs. blond). Moreover, readers who identify Ivan Tsarevich as a "battered uke" might anticipate multiple episodes of "kabedon" (being slammed against a wall before a caress or kiss) and "hurt-comfort," both of which contribute to the ending happy of any BL whose protagonists go from "enemies to lovers."⁵ In short, by introducing BL's formulaic characters and plot points into a Russian fairy tale, koriandr all but tells readers that the violently non-consensual sex they witness in the webcomic's opening volumes can and should turn into tender and abiding love. By reframing a Russian fairy tale as a work of BL, *im | mortal* shows us that the queer sex that initially caused humiliation, shame, and trauma ultimately holds the power to transform these toxic feelings into humility, acceptance, and love. Moreover, given the mythic Russian past in which *im | mortal* takes place, the webcomic points to Russia's long history of humiliating and shaming its queers at the same time that it depicts queerness as deeply embedded in Russian history. For its gay characters and explicit depictions of gay sex alone, *im | mortal* was deemed a worthy target for the 2022 anti-LGBTQ+ law, to which it fell prey in October 2023.⁶ Perhaps more importantly, *im | mortal*'s tale of

⁵ These standard BL tropes come from a list compiled by students in a course devoted to a survey of the genre of BL, which I taught during spring semester 2025 at Williams College.

⁶ Koriandr announced that *im | mortal* was "banned in my country" and "removed from bookstore websites by order of the state [as] propaganda of non-traditional relations" at the start of episode 16-11 on both Webtoon and Tapas.

converting the contagion and stigma of queerness into empathy, humility, and love is clearly a story that Putin's regime prefers not to hear, see, or tell.

If koriandr dives into the mythic past for her exploration of Russian queerness, then Katerina Sylvanova and Elena Malisova return to a more recent past, as well as an actual location, to tell a very different tale of queer shame becoming love in *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* (Sil'vanova and Malisova 2021).⁷ Initially written as fanfic before being published by Popcorn Books in 2021 (figure 3), the novel tells the tale of Yura and Volodya, camper and counselor at a late-Soviet summer camp for young Pioneers. Although a far cry from the sexually explicit *im | mortal*, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* also draws on classic BL tropes to tell its gay coming-of-age story set in 1986, which Yura recalls after returning, twenty years later, to the now abandoned Camp Barn Swallow. The novel's dual timeframe forces both Yura and the reader to shuttle between the late-Soviet and post-Soviet eras as he discovers the pleasures and pains of the past. Among the latter, we learn that the college-aged Volodya was well aware of his same-sex desire before he and Yura ever met and that Volodya, unsurprisingly, internalized the Soviet era's homophobic laws and attitudes, which deemed sodomy illegal and homosexuality a mental illness. Once the two boys discover their mutual attraction, a large swath of the plot set in 1986 involves the naïve and more openminded Yura trying to persuade Volodya that their love is neither a social sickness nor source of shame. Yura's efforts ultimately meet with success when the two boys have sex and bury a time capsule on the final night of summer camp. However, Volodya's deeply internalized homophobia lingers, shifting the site of queer trauma from the body, the source of Koshchei's pleasure and Ivan's pain in *im | mortal*, to the very core of Volodya's queer self.

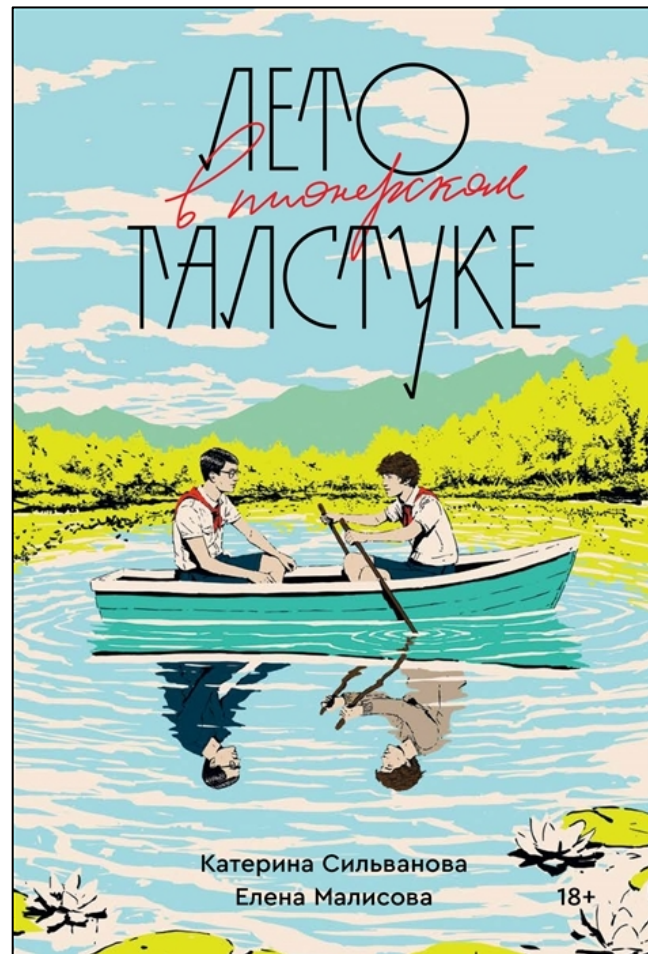


Figure 3. Cover of Katerina Sil'vanova's and Elena Malisova's 2021 *Leto v pionerskom galstuke* by Popcorn Books.

⁷ The English translation of the novel by Anne O. Fisher is scheduled for release in summer 2025 (Malisova and Sylvanova 2025). All passages quoted here come from Fisher's translation.

Summer in a Pioneer Tie gives this homophobia both a face and voice in the character of Masha, a clear example of the female villains typical to BL. At the same time as the two boys discover their mutual attraction, Yura's nosy fellow camper Masha takes a shine to his soon-to-be boyfriend. When she interrupts Yura and Volodya during "their second, grown-up kiss," her suspicion turns to disgust; she hysterically shrieks, "You're abnormal! You're sick!" and then forces the two boys to "Swear you'll never do that again" (Malisova and Sylvanova 2025, 281-282). However, when Masha follows through on her threat to snitch on Yura and Volodya, telling another counselor at the camp about their budding romance, her truthful accusation is mistaken for a lie. Apparently, the thought of an upstanding member of the Komsomol like Volodya kissing another boy is literally beyond belief.

Masha's malicious and self-interested homophobia may fail to do the damage she intends, yet it represents one of the myriad homophobic slurs that Volodya has heard, read, and internalized so that he now stigmatizes himself. As we might expect, the repeated shaming to which Volodya subjects himself at the mere thought of his homosexuality makes it impossible for him to talk about his feelings for Yura other than via circumlocution or in terms of self-disgust. His first attempt to tell Yura that he is gay ends with a reference to one of classical music's most eminent queers, which Volodya quickly backpedals: "I'm like Tchaikovsky! [. . .] I like music" (Malisova and Sylvanova 2025, 155). When the two boys finally discuss their attraction openly, Volodya immediately concedes, "I think Masha's probably right [. . .]. It's against nature, it's a psychological aberration [. . .]. It's not just bad, it's awful!" (Malisova and Sylvanova 2025, 199). He even quotes Maxim Gorky's infamous rehash of the "gay Nazi myth," which links the eradication of homosexuals to that of fascism. This repeated self-shaming overwhelms Volodya, who, we learn, has developed the habit of self-harming by scalding his hands in boiling water. We also discover that after his brief relationship with Yura, Volodya subjects himself to psychologically damaging conversion therapy for ten fruitless years (Malisova and Sylvanova 2025, 435). In short, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* uses its late-Soviet setting to show that the ultimate outcome of shaming Russian queers is a homophobia so deeply internalized that queers humiliate and punish themselves better than any statute in a criminal code or spiteful comment from a jealous interloper ever could.

Unlike koriandr, who continues to post episodes of *im | mortal* online, Sylvanova and Malisova have already brought their novel to its happy end and even published a sequel, *The Silence of the Swallows*, which traces Yura and Volodya's story beyond 2006.⁸ *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* concludes as the two lovers meet again, thanks to the time capsule they buried, so that they can continue to heal the wounds both have endured. While Yura rekindled his once extinguished passion for classical music thanks to their love at summer camp, Volodya has been stuck not just in an endless loop of self-disgust, but also

⁸ Malisova and Sylvanova have rewritten and expanded *Silence of the Swallows* and will publish this new material in revamped volumes two and three in their series. The second volume in English is slated to appear in 2026, while the third will come out in 2027.

on Camp Barn Swallow's land, which he bought as a real estate investment and now lives on. Although the novel gives ample justification for Volodya ending up next door to where he first confessed his homosexuality, his compulsion to return to the site where he also first experienced another man's love points to his hunger for the restorative compassion that Yura once gave him. True to BL form, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* ends with the two men embracing on the very spot where they once made love and buried their time capsule, "as time stood still around them" and as Volodya asks Yura to play Tchaikovsky's "Lullaby." This request for the very song that enabled Yura's return to music twenty years ago tells us that Volodya's own journey away from shame and towards self-acceptance and love has finally begun.

Sylvanova and Malisova's tale of queer love rising out of the ashes of queer shame had a sizable following even before its official publication, which only increased the number of Volodya and Yura's fans. In addition to countless Tweets and every conceivable style and genre of fanart on sites from VK to Tumblr, many of the book's fans posted videos on TikTok, which showed them shedding heartfelt tears as they read the story of Yura and Volodya's forbidden love. When the book became a bestseller, a significant number of anti-fans also emerged, including several highly incensed doyens of Russian culture. Zakhar Prilepin, for example, declared that Popcorn Books should be called "pornobooks" (Prilepin 2022), while Nikita Mikhalkov, in a bizarre reverse echo of Gorky, insinuated that Sylvanova and Malisova's novel not only promotes an LGBTQ+ agenda, but also somehow enables fascism and Nazism (Sector Video 2023). As a result of these slurs, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* became the immediate cause of the Russian Duma's decision to revamp 2013's "gay propaganda" law into the 2022 anti-LGBTQ+ law (Matsaeva 2022; Schimpfössl and Sandalov 2022).⁹ After both volumes of the book were promptly banned, Sylvanova and Malisova found themselves labeled "foreign agents" and forced to flee Russia. If such drastic measures seem excessive for a YA romance that depicts gay sex obliquely as something "sweet-smothering-hot," we should remember that Sylvanova and Malisova dared to trespass not only in the late-Soviet past, but also on Ukrainian soil, since they locate the fictional Camp Barn Swallow just outside the non-fictional city of Kharkiv, hometown of one of the book's authors (Malisova and Sylvanova 2025, 372). In other words, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* depicts a queer Soviet past that Putin has already deleted from Russia's history books and proposes Ukraine as the site where queer Russians' shame and humiliation can become empathy and love.

Despite the obvious differences that separate *im | mortal* from *Summer in a Pioneer Tie*, both tell the same basic story thanks to their shared reliance on BL's canonical tropes. While *im | mortal* lingers over the surface of queer bodies, portraying their shame and humiliation via sexual violence, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* explores the shame to which queers subject themselves once the stigma of queerness stains their souls. Moreover, both of these banned works use the past, be it distant myth or recent historical reality, to imagine a future in which queer humiliation might morph into humility and queer shame

⁹ For a thoughtful overview of the scandal that engulfed the novel and culminated in the 2022 anti-LGBTQ+ law, watch Shainian 2023.

might lead to love. To borrow from Muñoz's introduction to *Cruising Utopia*, both *im | mortal* and *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* represent queerness as "an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future," thereby rejecting the terrifying here and now of Putin's Russia and insisting on the possibility of a more caring world (Muñoz 2009, 1). These two works of Russophone BL do not merely imagine the queerness that has always been a part of Russia's history in direct defiance of Putin's efforts to erase it from the historical record. Ultimately, they envision a humbler and queerer future for Russia by fostering a queer epistemology that sees, feels, and desires far beyond the quagmire of Putin's cynical homophobia, xenophobia, and Ukrainophobia. The thousands of Russian speakers who have joined the fandoms of *im | mortal*, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie*, and BL more widely share the same shame-inflected queerness as LGBTQ+ Russians and their allies, since they all preserve a vision of Russia's past that admits queerness, and all hope for a future that will respect and sustain not just queer, but all lives through humility and love.

Admittedly, using shame as a hermeneutic that allows us to perceive and understand queerness means letting many more people into the queer party than those who have long been there because they identify as LGBTQ+. The horizontal networks of BL's largely female fandom not only in Russian, but in all languages is both innumerable and unknowable, since the online platforms where fans congregate let them mask everything from their names and addresses to their gender identities and sexual preferences. However, given that we live in an age of social media surveillance, enhanced security measures, and identity theft, inviting even anonymous guests to join this particular party seems fitting and even liberating. Even though the hermeneutic of queerness I propose here originates in the exclusion caused by shame, those of us who have felt this humiliation and taken the time to turn it into humility understand that our job is not to exclude anyone, but rather to include those whose experience of shame aligns with our own. After all, the more people we bring into the queer party of which SQS is now part, the more likely we are to topple the power verticals and burst the anti-woke bubbles that make not only queer, but all life precarious in the present day. Like koriandr, Malisova, Sylvanova, and their fans, we need to discover, attend to, and celebrate the full range of queer voices not just in the Russian Federation but in Russophone space more broadly, so that we help preserve the imperiled past, present, and future of Russian queers. Once we realize that what we wear to this party does not matter and that none of us is an imposter, we will be able to see more clearly the homosexuality in all homosociality and to show our students how queer Tolstoy and Dostoevsky often are, as well as how the "great, mighty, truthful, and free Russian language" is wielded not only by lying cowards to enslave and destroy so many lives, but also by humiliated and humble queers to liberate and preserve them.¹⁰ Perhaps we actually can become an "international LGBT organization," as Putin's regime has branded us, since our extreme times call for equally extreme measures.

¹⁰ I.S. Turgenev, "Russkii iazyk" (1882), available at <https://ilibrary.ru/text/1378/p.51/index.html>.

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In Bed with the West? Central Eastern European Queerness and Western Theory

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Bodies of Theory, Bodies as Theory

The categories of “Central Eastern European” (CEE) and “queer” are infinitely and continuously pliable in encounters with each other. An invitation to the editorial board of this US-based journal, along with a request to reflect on CEE queerness for its inaugural issue, prompted me to investigate my attachments to and negotiations of these categories, which I embody as a Polish lesbian art historian working in the European – and often American – West. This essay is an ongoing theorization of how CEE bodies of thought on gender and sexualities interact with, draw upon, and illuminate limitations of their Western, predominantly Anglophone, discursive counterparts, and what this might propose for articulations of Polish—or CEE— lesbians. The body, as it recurs throughout my work, becomes central here to my consideration of how these disparate discourses may brush against each other. I propose a consideration of these encounters of CEE and Western queer bodies of thought, their entanglements, incompatibilities, and finally a desiring, affective way in which I bring them together to present no easy answers or neat solutions, but a shifting dynamic of dismantling the preconceived East/West power imbalance.

I wrote the first draft of this text in New York in February 2025, never more attuned to the entanglements of bodies, affect, politics, and my CEE positionality alongside them. I had come to New York to attend the annual College Art Association conference, where I struggled to articulate my disciplinary loyalties in my choice of panels: between CEE and queer/trans-focused sessions on offer, I prioritized the latter as a matter of (disciplinary) urgency and solidarity. (I prioritized attending a protest—an immediate response to the erasure of trans and queer histories of the Stonewall Riot—over the conference altogether.) I felt less affinity with the geographically motivated inquiries of CEE-themed panels, even though in my own work geopolitical positionalities vis-à-vis Western, Anglophone theory matter a great deal. I ask myself at this point whether the often exoticizing treatment of CEE in the context of the West and Western queerness might in fact be, perversely, a turn-on for me—but I seem rather to follow my desire and question my modes of belonging in such encounters; I want for my CEE positionality to find critical affinities, despite its illegibilities, across contexts, across especially the seemingly ossified East/West axis.

Bodies emerge as central to these investigations for their ability to capture, disturb, and articulate the political delineations to which they are subject. Joan Nestle’s words, as she reflects on writing and feeling lesbian histories, are “born in passionate places,” are

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“dreams of the body made from real moments. They are intimacies made public because the fragility of touch and the weight of history haunt” her (Nestle 1987, xi). Mere days after the US Park Service had removed the letters “T” and “Q” from the National Park Service website for the Stonewall National Monument, I held a new lover’s trans body in my arms—the warmth of his lived-in skin against the discursive coldness of yet another very real attack on trans lives. I often think of theory in bed, and how theory happens in bed: how an American trans body and a Polish lesbian body in contact might generate thoughts that expand, that must expand, onto our political lives and geographies intimate and transatlantic. My Polish experience of reading US lesbian theory, separated geographically, historically, and temporally, often produces a frustration of an unbreachable distance. A lover’s body grounds my understanding of theory in the here and now, allows me to touch what I had read, and articulate the difference I perceive between us in my Polishness, in how sexuality and the body have been shaped by distinctive narratives in CEE, which had themselves been meaningfully shaped by the West (see, e.g., Wolff 1994; Murawska-Muthesius 2021). This is my starting point for theoretical elucidations of a CEE, often Polish, lesbian.

That I feel emboldened to do so I owe to the fearlessness of writers like Nestle and the need to reach the wisdom already gained by someone else. I learn from Nestle’s body as she offers it to lovers and to the reader. In a more visceral way than a conference participation, my own memory of the warmth of a lover’s skin always leads me back to my theoretical lesbian. I cannot seem to unpeel the theory from the body, so instead I become curious about what it means to experience theory through a body, in this case—my Polish lesbian body moulded into shape and its otherness by Western theory.

Categories of both queerness and CEE always seem to signify some kind of otherness or difference, but to agree on the outlines of either appears hardly possible. Much like queerness has been deliberately a category in flux, and a critical one, CEE became a shifting, unstable landscape of discontent, politically, geographically, and conceptually. Even in the discussion surrounding the shape of the inaugural issue of this journal, questions appeared as to what “Slavic” means or should entail: is the boundary language, history, degree of separation from—belonging to—Soviet history? Yet, we were asked to write on Central Eastern European queerness—the two terms applied interchangeably yet not meaning the same. What kinds of queerness does this designate or elucidate? Finally, what does it mean that we had no similar discussion surrounding queerness and its ontologies? In search of meaning, I offer here a consideration of how bodies of theories have interacted between CEE and Western queer and lesbian cultures.

Encounters

The tension of encounters between CEE and Western queer and lesbian writings, often generative but equally often reductive, challenges the perceived universality, centrality, and neutrality of Western theoretical approaches. While in New York, I visited the Lesbian Herstory Archives, by all means an emotional pilgrimage. Among other materials, I pulled the very thin folder marked “Poland” from a packed filing cabinet. It

included two pieces of writing about two Americans' impressions of Poland in September 1977 and August 1981. The former was a letter sent to the January 1981 issue of the lesbian magazine *On Our Backs* by reader Arlene Zarembaska of St. Louis, and the latter—an article by gay playwright and community organiser Abe Rybeck in a June 1982 issue of *Gay Community News*.

Rybeck's piece reflected, from a self-admittedly outsider perspective, on the role of the Catholic Church in Poland. Prompted by the sighting of the pink triangle patches worn by homosexual prisoners at Auschwitz, it traced Solidarity's position on "the subject of homosexuals" (Rybeck 1982). Rybeck expressed puzzlement over the apparent total absence of gay or lesbian people in Poland ("We don't have that problem here," he had heard from one Solidarity foreign press official), until spotting some on his own: "But what about those men in drag? And what about the two women I saw sitting on a park bench, laughing, kissing and sharing an ice cream cone? (Lesbians? The Poles I asked usually thought that lesbians were just a Greek myth.)" Eventually, upon his return to the US, Rybeck found out more about (mainly) gay locales in Warsaw, naming two coffee houses, "Pioprus and Janeczka," presumably meaning "Piotruś" and "Janeczka," which translate as "Little Pete" and "Little Janey." Notably, he pointed out the strong current of the developing feminist movement in Poland, albeit ascribing its birth solely to "basic feminist theory" sent to Polish women by friends from France. Conversely, Zarembaska's letter to *On Our Backs* laments the futility of trying to "explain" to Polish women what feminism is: "Everywhere I went, I tried to talk to women about feminism. Women did not even know what the word meant, so I tried using other phrases instead of 'feminism'—the emancipation of women, the women's movement, women's liberation, etc. All drew blanks. ... I concluded that a feminist would quickly go crazy in Poland" (Zarembaska 1981). Even for the time, the arrogance of this statement is staggering, and begs the question of where the writer had looked for feminism in Poland, having reportedly asked in bookshops and spoken to women "everywhere I went." Zarembaska also makes a broad statement about the "infrequency" of rape in Poland, and concludes: "I could not figure out the basis for this difference between the US and Poland in this regard, for Poland still is a patriarchal society" (implicitly, as opposed to the US?). She makes a brief note of the coffee houses frequented by gay men and lesbians but rushes to add that the prevailing attitude towards homosexuality is, "of course," that it is perverse. It is striking to note that the much more attentive, nuanced account of homosexuality, but also feminism, came from a gay man—there too, however, the West appears as the main source of information and discourse formation. And so, the two pieces found in the same tiny archival file (and replicated ad infinitum elsewhere) present a clear case: in all matters CEE, notably queer-feminist, notably on questions of gender and sexuality, the West is an unreliable narrator.

Yet, its relevance remains. I think with American lesbian studies texts regularly, and they have elucidated to me both my desires and theoretical elocutions of lesbians and lesbianism. Other lesbian scholars from Poland think with them, too (see, e.g., Mizielińska 1997, Olasik 2017). It seems inevitable, given the scant amount of theorising

on the local ground, to anchor what we know elsewhere, in the wisdom already earned by others. This is not to say that there is no lesbian scholarship in the region—it is, rather, that its preoccupations are different, often focused on activism, nationhood, family, and visibility (see, e.g., Wielogłaska and Rak 2018; Mizielińska 2022; Weseli 2009; Kowalska 2011; Struzik 2012; Małgowska 2020). I long for the theoretical and conceptual considerations of lesbians in the Polish and CEE contexts that attend to theories of desire, theories of sex and sexuality, of who or what a lesbian *is*—and these concerns are available to me in Anglophone lesbian studies. What still needs to be largely written is the specific positionality of a CEE lesbian as particularly gendered and sexed, a site of desiring decolonial possibility to theorize CEE gender and sexualities outside of their otherness conceived in opposition to the West.

Joanna Mizielińska, one of the first scholars to write about lesbianism in the Polish context, contemplated the question of the Polish lesbian in an essay titled “Lesbianism in Poland between consciousness and its lack” in the inaugural issue of the lesbian magazine *Furia Pierwsza* (First Fury) (Mizielińska 1997, 29). She proposed reading the situation of Polish lesbians in relation to Western feminist lesbian discourse, mainly Adrienne Rich’s seminal “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), and assessed the significance of Western theoretical discourse for the conditions of 1990s Poland. She noted that lesbians she had interviewed in Poland “understood their existence as individual, unaware of shared lived experience, on which to build common political objectives. Often, they described their own case as a private struggle of an individual for acceptance of others” (Mizielińska 1997, 29). One of her respondents commented: “There exists a model of lesbian culture in Western Europe and the US. In Poland it is possible for such culture to be conceived if women identify consciously as lesbians and are willing to talk, debate, and build common values, e.g., Lesbian Studies” (Mizielińska, “Lesbianism in Poland” 29). Such attempts, if undertaken, have been short-lived and did not systemically challenge the individualistic feeling many Polish lesbians had declared to Mizielińska. It seems as though the feeling of disconnectedness from a community or a common political goal had not changed between the years of state socialism and the 1990s, even with the influx of Western lesbian discourses, which often seem ill-fitting or even incomprehensible to Polish lesbians. Mizielińska’s questionnaire revealed, for example, that her respondents were puzzled by or frequently skipped the questions about roles, behaviour codes, or clothing in the Polish context. One commented: “I don’t know what it’s like in Poland. In Berlin—the weirder, the better. In USA (California), maybe short hair and jeans (butch), and more feminine outfits. Maybe piercings everywhere? Difficult to tell since these trends are immediately appropriated by heteros who want to be cool” (Mizielińska 1997, 45).

While visibility is one of the central tenets of *Furia*’s mission statement, it appears that it refers mainly to lesbians’ visibility to themselves and to one another, as it calls for “not silencing *one’s own* existence” (*Furia* editorial collective 1997, 3; emphasis added). This stance is more akin to what I call legibility—indeed, *Furia* did not have a large national readership, but in its short-lived existence (1997–2000, later re-published as *Furia* [Fury],

2009-2012), it continued to address lesbians and women interested in issues of feminism, women's rights, politics, and queer and gender studies. The aesthetic of *Furia* is striking in its ability, across its two renditions, to connect the intellectual, the academic, the desiring, the literary, the pop-cultural, and the art-historical contexts of Polish lesbianism's thinking, relating it to its international, mainly Western, counterparts, notably Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Simone de Beauvoir, and Monique Wittig, among others.¹ Its covers have reproductions of, for instance, Claude Cahun's *Untitled (Self-Portrait)* (1928; 2/1997) and Frances B. Johnston's photograph *Self-Portrait (As New Woman)* (1896; 4–5/1999–2000). The second issue in 2010 included an article titled "Who Killed Jennifer Schecter: Would You Have Killed Her, Had You Known Her?" referring to the death of Jenny, a much-reviled character in the breakthrough US lesbian TV drama *The L Word*.

Furia was also one of the first outlets in Poland to publish, in 2000, a selection of Adrienne Rich's poems, in Mizielińska's translation (Koronkiewicz 2019, 202). In the same year, Rich's *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution* appeared in Poland (also in Mizielińska's translation), as well as her seminal essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (translated by Agnieszka Grzybek, likewise published in *Furia*). Marta Koronkiewicz wrote about the mixed reception of Rich's oeuvre in Poland, especially considering its anachronistic appearance: the 1976 *Of Woman Born*, while an important feminist text of its time, seemed simply outdated in 2000s Poland (Koronkiewicz 2019, 204). Yet, when in 2016 Jakub Głuszak published his Polish translation of Rich's *21 Love Poems* (1974–6), critics pointed out the vacuum and the absence of a tradition on local ground for his translated volume, as well as "the lack of developed language [and] the immaturity of Polish literature in the sphere of lesbian eroticism" (Koronkiewicz 2019, 211). In her "Rich's Pink Panther" D. Muszyńska observes, "[Rich] wrote of herself from the perspective of time: 'The suppressed lesbian I had been carrying in me since adolescence began to stretch her [bones].' Stretching the American's bones could become a spine for lesbian culture in Poland" (Muszyńska 2017, 158). Though concurring that such models are needed, Koronkiewicz pointed out some difficulties inherent in translations (Koronkiewicz 2019, 211). The unpreparedness of the Polish context that had not shaped its own language of lesbian eroticism meant that Polish translations of such works from English were necessarily lacking, both in expression and the ability to ground lesbian eroticism in the language that *was* available. These anachronisms point to temporal tensions in Polish and American, or Eastern and Western, discourses. Several contexts intersect here: it becomes clear that CEE does not simply look to the West for discursive leadership. The 2000 translation of Rich's 1976 text turned out to be outdated, not conducive to the strong feminist history of twentieth century Poland. At the same time, the lack of and need for lesbian writings, including on lesbian eroticism, remained palpable in 2016. Although welcome, these narratives and translations have not seamlessly integrated into the Polish language and therefore into

¹ See issues 4-6 (1999-2000).

the Polish context. While considered necessary and discourse-making, they remained at times cumbersome.

A New Lesbian Body?

What especially strikes me in Muszyńska's phrasing is the use of the embodied metaphor as a proposition for how these two distinct bodies of thought might, if not integrate, then interact. Considering the immaturity of the Polish language to handle the complex sphere of lesbian erotics, it is clear that it is the lesbian body—discursive and real—that has not been evoked. Thus, an American lesbian's bones may necessarily become a Polish lesbian's spine, a vital supportive frame of an independent organism. Muszyńska's yearning for this body taps into a central lack of embodiment in Polish lesbian theorizing, and suggests a profound consideration of the ways in which bodies and theory, Polish and American, may come together in an almost cannibalistic dance yet not become one. I consider how the separateness of an American lover's body becomes my Polish lesbian articulation of the self. Here, difference precedes sameness: my tender curiosity about my lover's body guides my touch, marking the difference between us, my fingers tracing the permeable limits of another's skin. We intersect, overlap, his head brushes against my breasts, we are legible to each other but not the same. I take him in but I do not disappear, my boundaries permeated yet intact. This is where theory appears, and where it is negotiated. I brush against American lesbian theory texts, ready to negotiate our boundaries, soft and malleable against each other.

This erotic, desiring thinking about the body as theory-making is a direct challenge to how the CEE body has been made. One reason the body, along with Western thought on Polish and CEE lesbian scholarship, may have such resonance is that historically CEE has been largely externally defined and its local specificities often erased through its "invention" by the formation of Western European modern identities based on an established sense of difference and othering (see, e.g., Wolff 1994; Murawska-Muthesius 2021). In her important volume *Imaging and Mapping Eastern Europe: Sarmatia Europea to Post-Communist Bloc*, Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius proposes that the knowledge production and consolidation offered by mappings of CEE caused an epistemic confusion, especially in the wake of communism, and revealed the difficulty of placing the "new" CEE. Bodies and maps as bodily concepts in CEE are unmistakably volatile and continuously negotiated both through CEE's desire for self-definition and its tendency to self-orientalize. Murawska-Muthesius, after Larry Wolff, writes that "[t]he notion of rape and conquest would indeed serve as the region's master narrative, turning into a key argument in major cultural disputes on the international scene" (Murawska-Muthesius 2021, 2).

Crucially, the CEE difference and subjugation based on the body has largely referred to gender and sexuality, and their conflation with CEE racial difference.² As Hadley Z.

² This also includes imaginations of Ashkenazi Jewish identities that are tied to CEE as a historical region. See e.g. Seidman 2011.

Renkin wrote, against Western European modernity and its emerging scientific discourse, CEE has been read “as a site of psycho-sexual and civilizational immaturity, producing ... narratives that fabricated Eastern European sexuality as a biopolitical marker of European difference” (Renkin 2016, 168). Eastern Europeans were received by travelers from the West as a confirmation of the success of their own civilising efforts, appreciated against CEE “perverse geographies” (Bleys 1995, 5). Thus this context of CEE *scientia sexualis* (see also Renkin and Kościańska 2016) makes it particularly compelling to hone in on the figure of a Polish lesbian as a decolonial possibility for a self-narration from the region, following the late pre-eminent feminist Polish literature scholar Maria Janion’s considerations of decolonial rethinking of the Polish sense of rootlessness and the torpor of the theorizations of Polishness she attributed to the “inability to read and interpret Poland’s cultural past” (Janion 2006, 112).³ The long and complex histories of colonization in Poland trouble the Polish possibility of self-perception: between internal colonization of the feudal system, the subjugation of Lithuania in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569-1795), the long period of partitions (1795-1918), the two world wars, and decades of Soviet Russia’s influence (1945-1989), present a landscape of Poland as stuck between superiority and inferiority, between the consciousness of the colonized and the colonizer. The long-lasting subjugation developed a mythology of Polish martyrdom, renewed in the twenty-first century by the far-right politics of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (The Law and Justice Party). Janion, a profoundly influential scholar of Polish Romantic literature (which first birthed the concept of Polish martyrology in the nineteenth century), lashed out against such contemporary political far-right claims on its messianic nationalism, which proclaims that Poland, like Jesus, suffered for other nations’ sins. In *Uncanny Slavdom*, Janion famously posed questions of rethinking Polish national identity through a decolonial lens, meaning interactions with the oft-overlooked local bodies of local cultural and historical knowledge (Janion 2006, 113). This was necessary, she argued, owing to the feeling of rootlessness surrounding the formation of Polish identity untethered to its history and mythology pervasive in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when it became again possible to self-constitute in a newly independent country.

A (cultural, linguistic) re-rooting in the local proposed by Janion, through a consideration of the Polish lesbian offers an important decolonial gesture for thinking about CEE gender and sexualities, not through the context of the Western discourse of othering, but rather through the modes of self-narration and self-theorization possible in CEE itself. In *The Feminism of Uncertainty*, the American feminist writer Ann Snitow wrote about meeting the Polish self-proclaimed lesbian-feminist Sławka Walczewska in Cracow in March 1991: “I say to myself at this point: of course feminism is indigenous; all European countries had nineteenth-century women’s movements. Sławka’s feminism comes from the soil right here beneath this house, and I am merely a visitor, without influence or interference – what a relief” (Snitow 2015, 220). The implied transhistorical

³ An English translation of Janion’s work has appeared in *PMLA* 138 (1).

aspect of indigenous, local feminisms makes Snitow a self-declared outsider of Polish feminism, despite her coming with the gravitas of an American feminist and lesbian theory, which often presumes the centrality of US thought vis-à-vis other contexts. Her sigh of relief suggests the feeling of being unburdened from the weight of the perceived universality of American theory and its apparent ahistoricity (which the anachronistic Polish translations of Rich both reiterated and troubled). This is not to claim that Polish feminist and lesbian writers and scholars have not engaged with Western theoretical contexts—certainly Adrienne Rich and Monique Wittig have been influential. These, however, have been employed rather to assess the extent to which they may be useful or applicable to specifically Polish conditions (see, e.g., Mizielińska 1997). While in productive dialogue, the American (and, often, French, notably Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray's *écriture féminine* for Polish feminists—see, e.g., Chowanec 2009) contexts have remained foreign or ill-fitting. It is not that Polish or CEE feminist and lesbian discourses cannot self-define or self-theorize. It is, rather, that brushing against the existing bodies of knowledge, already written and accessible, they recognise their own shapes, feel themselves against the edges of these foreign bodies, and make themselves, in turn, foreign but real to them. It is not that Polish theory-making impulses must take and ingest what the centrality of the American discourses proposes. Yet, it can, perhaps, cannibalize and regurgitate the American contexts so that they too can see each other anew, understand their edges—much like Snitow's assessment of Polish feminism made her a self-proclaimed outsider. For all the willingness to melt into one another, these discourses remain separate, if recognizable to each other through their respective edges, more clearly outlined for and by one another, and bound by desire.

Therein I see a crucial opportunity, even while I reach for (largely) American lesbian and feminist theory and lean on its edges, to anchor the lesbian discourses in “the soil right beneath this house.” This means looking for narratives that go to the very heart of histories of women's self-constitution as a social group in nineteenth-century Poland: stories of suffrage and its inextricable connections with friendship, as well as love, desire, sex, and romantic relationships between women. Facing scattered, invisible archives of sparse records and unintelligible feelings, we must think through them beyond the institutional and patriarchal strategies of organizing, indeed through our bodies and their coming together, for, as Nestle insists, sexuality “is a whole world in itself that feeds the fires of all our other accomplishments” (1987, 108). What may just emerge is a new way of thinking a lesbian in Poland and in CEE, one anchored in a body, sometimes supported by an American lesbian's spine, at other times held by the histories of the “soil right beneath this house.” This emergent body is not the same as the CEE historical body outlined by Murawska-Muthesius: conquered, docile, abused. Instead, it is guided by pleasure and softness of touch that engender the possibility of self-constitution, self-historicization, indeed self-theorization.

I argue that not only can the figure of a lesbian move past this standstill signalled by Janion (2006, 113), but “lesbian” also functions as a critical category with which to destabilize the ways women have been committed to biopolitical sexual and gender

orders. "Polish lesbian" as a category straddles these different contexts and allows questioning the ways in which Poland has been implicated in the sexual and gendered scientific ordering of CEE desires and sex as designed by the West, at intersection with the internalized Polish homophobia as its "natural" position in CEE, as well as the inability for Poland's general public to interact critically with its own local bodies of knowledge. "Polish lesbian" challenges these orderings of knowledge in both implicitly and explicitly decolonial ways, re-centring desire that is (1) Polish: embedded in cultural, historical, linguistic, artistic, literary references and intergenerational, transhistorical desire across the archive; (2) CEE: questioning the central, presumed civilized, more sophisticated ways of delineating, theorizing, and producing desire in the West by reorienting it towards these local contexts and debunking the myths of Eastern primitivism and orientalism; and (3) Lesbian: straddling the Polish and CEE contexts, lesbian desire remains the central critical category and contributes to reclaiming the ontological instability of a lesbian, her "uselessness" (Mizielińska 2001, 283) as a woman and a mother, and establishes the ecstatic possibility of claiming this uselessness as a way of being that resists a biopolitical and, indeed, necropolitical arrangement of queer and women's lives.

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

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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,

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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 Merezkovsky (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.

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Valerii Pereleshin's Queer Self-Translation

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Abstract: Valerii Pereleshin has been considered an anomaly in Russophone letters: a gay Russian émigré poet, he lived half his life in Rio de Janeiro, writing poetry that he then self-published, dabbling in Portuguese in the 1980s. He had a carefully cultivated readership among the Russian diaspora scattered worldwide after the Bolshevik revolution, a readership that he mostly lost after he finally came out in print with his 1976 collection of poems, *Ariel*. Its rejection coincided with some significant developments in Pereleshin's life: a new friendship with Winston Leyland, a leading publisher of gay male literature in the United States, and a chance meeting with young Brazilian man, Humberto Passos, who became one of Pereleshin's great loves and encouraged a new passion for writing in Portuguese. All while the gay rights movement in Brazil under a disintegrating military dictatorship that offered an opening for Pereleshin's increasingly public gay writings in both languages. It is an accepted narrative that Pereleshin never engaged with a broader gay literary establishment. This article undermines that narrative by tracing Pereleshin's burgeoning queer sensibility through an analysis of his "To the Green Eyed Boy," an unpublished poem originally written in Russian, then later rewritten by Pereleshin in Portuguese so it could be yet further translated into English and finally published by Leyland. Pereleshin's journey between Russian and Portuguese raises questions of self-translation and how queerness is encoded in new originals and new languages, cementing Pereleshin's place as one of the most important gay writers of the past century.

In late 1977, *Christopher Street* published "A Hidden Masterpiece: Valery Pereleshin's *Ariel*," in which the author, Simon Karlinsky, introduced Pereleshin to the world as one of its pre-eminent unknown gay writers (reprinted in Karlinsky 2013). The article set in motion the narrative that came to define Pereleshin: a lonely gay poet in Brazil, in love with an unattainable man who nonetheless served as his muse, writing in a Russian so carefully wrought that it would be almost impossible for his work to be translated into English. That narrative assumes that Pereleshin remained isolated, by choice, throughout his literary career, but it is a mistaken assumption. Starting in the later 1970s Pereleshin made connections with Brazilian and global gay society, facilitated in part by Karlinsky himself, but also through Pereleshin's own connections, relationships, and need to be

I wish to thank Olga Bakich for her support of my research on Pereleshin, whom she knew personally. Dr. Bakich has always patiently answered my many questions (which often have required her to search through hundreds of pages of letters) and also provided insight into Pereleshin's frame of mind when he began writing in Portuguese. Likewise, I am grateful to Winston Leyland for speaking with me about his time in Brazil.

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recognized as an important gay writer (Leyland, 2025a; Bakich 2015, 218). To reach his new readership, Pereleshin had to both translate his own poetry and have it translated by others.

In fact, Pereleshin was an experienced translator: he had long been translating poetry from Chinese into Russian, for example, and enjoyed playing with the possibilities offered by new and different languages (Bakich 2015, 229). Pereleshin also had a didactic purpose: his translations of Mikhail Kuzmin, Anatoly Shteiger, and Fernando Pessoa were intended to broaden the audience for the world's gay literature. Likewise, Pereleshin selected some of his Russian-language poems for translation into English and inclusion in gay literary anthologies; these poems served as entry points into a new global gay liberation movement.

Pereleshin's self-translations from Russian into Portuguese served a different purpose, however, even as the choice of language makes clear that he was reaching out to a Brazilian readership. The translations recast and reinvented the Russian originals so as to highlight the physicality of his homosexuality. They were, in effect, new works: Pereleshin commented in letters to his correspondents that his new Portuguese versions were "not translations, but parallel poems" (Bakich 2015, 242). Parallel poems of parallel lives: in Brazil he was always translating his life between two languages and two realities, existing astride the conflicts between his Russian-language poetic and spiritual self and his Portuguese-language physical reality, between his family (his mother and often his younger brother, Victor) and his infatuations with young men he would meet during his daily life.

Writing more suggestive works in Portuguese was not an obvious outcome of Pereleshin's artistic and personal journey. In his earlier years in China, Pereleshin had studied to join the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy, partially to wrestle with, and extinguish, his queer desires. His poems from the 1970s onward are the culmination of a long struggle to accept his homosexuality, when he formulated his idea of "spiritual lefthandedness" ("dukhovnaia levshizna"), a euphemism that emphasizes the idea that being gay is as natural a variant as any other (Bakich 2015, 214). (Still, "left-handed" in Portuguese can mean demonic and deviant, a short distance to "queer.")

In hindsight, where Pereleshin found himself in 1974 was at a certain personal inflection point in a lifetime of change. Born in Irkutsk in 1913, Valerii Pereleshin (the pseudonym of Valerii Frantsevich Salatko-Petrishche) was buffeted by the century's turmoil: the Russian Revolution, the First World War, the Second World War, the Chinese Civil War and Revolution, and, finally, the Cold War. In Brazil he experienced the demise of democracy in 1964 by military coup and its restoration seven years before he died, in 1992. In the early 1980s he witnessed the beginnings of the AIDS epidemic even as gay liberation worldwide was steadily progressing. His status as exile since early childhood meant that he constructed his Russian-language identity in emigration; living almost forty years in Brazil created the psychological space for a gay male physicality. It was Brazil itself that changed Pereleshin, as he openly admitted in a 1974 interview (Li and Sylvester 2005). No wonder that stepping off the boat in Rio de Janeiro in 1953 and then

witnessing his first Carnival was such a shock (Beaudoin 2022, 68-69).

However, the yearly Carnival, with all its excess and transgression, gives us a clue to understanding Pereleshin's reinvention through self-translation: it was breathtaking to witness the transformation of Rio's populace from machismo to gender-bending. That transformation serves as a template for considering Pereleshin's self-translations, with their emphatic sexual details, in a new framework. Pereleshin is in fact engaging in poetic drag: reliving and recreating events from his past, immediate or distant, in a language (Portuguese) that gave him the opportunity to explore who he felt he was—or, perhaps more accurately, had become—in such a way as to be an add-on, a surplus, to his sexually impoverished Russian-language existence. More flamboyant, more gay, more lustful. Even choosing to write his name in Portuguese as “Valério Pereliéchin,” instead of keeping his name transliterated as he did in other languages, hints at drag and disguise. In his poetic drag, Pereleshin's new originals mask their Doppelgänger, staging different interpretations of his world and of its queer experiences, providing new rhetorical positions and new understandings.

Pereleshin came out to his readership with the publication of *Ariel*, his ninth collection of poetry, in 1976. Written between 1972-75, it was inspired by a random correspondence initiated by Evgenii Vitkovskii, a university student in Moscow. Pereleshin fell in love with Vitkovskii from a distance, flattered by the younger man's attention; no matter that Vitkovskii was married and had a son.¹ Pereleshin had invented a spiritual lover whose very existence created poetry, one who was intended to be a partner in the superiority of art over heterosexual procreation; it was the artistic connection between the two that provided the fodder for the cycle's sonnets (Chernetsky 2003, 62-63). *Ariel's* poetic arc begins with the intensity of Pereleshin's desire for the young Russian, framed in the same-sex lore of Ancient Greece, and continues to document, diary-like, the bitterness Pereleshin feels when Vitkovskii rebuffs his lyrical advances. Jilted by his muse, Pereleshin then writes sonnets dedicated to the Brazilian men who satisfy the void Vitkovskii's rejection causes. It is a startling and deeply personal journey that is filled with hope and heartbreak—and ends in resignation. *Ariel* is explicitly homoerotic, but at the same time it remains cautious, never becoming too overt; it reveals the split in Pereleshin's life between his Russian artistic constraints and the sexuality of his Brazilian existence (Chernetsky 2003, 65).

Ariel's open queerness enraged and disgusted Pereleshin's émigré readers, who were left to wonder what had made Pereleshin gay. Was it those Brazilian boys, whose sensuality and availability made him lose sight of the purity of Russian culture (Bakich 2015, 217)? Even his own brother, Victor, joined the chorus of condemnation, exclaiming during heated arguments that gays should be “destroyed or castrated” (Basílio 2021). All this even though Pereleshin had established a noble pedigree for *Ariel's* theme: the

¹ Was Vitkovskii gay? Vitaly Chernetsky takes him at face value and implies that he is not (Chernetsky 2003, 64). Karlinsky claims he is, whereas Leung writes that Karlinsky is conflating Pereleshin's imagined Vitkovskii with the real one (Karlinsky 2013, 304; Leung 2022, 99). Vitkovskii himself wrote about how uncomfortable it was to be on the receiving end of such passionate gay affection (Vitkovskii 2013, 17).

sonnets of Shakespeare and the works of Fernando Pessoa (Bakich 2015, 208, 214; Leung, 2022). His readers wrote angrily that *Ariel* was pornographic; Pereleshin calmly pointed out that pornography is written for the majority, not the minority (Bakich 2015, 215). The reaction to *Ariel* forced Pereleshin to openly side with that same gay minority, which was beginning to claim its place in the public and artistic spheres. It also pushed him to write in Portuguese.

The late 1970s in Brazil were dramatic: the end of the military dictatorship was clearly approaching and there were mass demonstrations in the streets of major cities, along with a growing sense of gay community. James N. Green, who witnessed the beginning of gay organizing during that unrest, described it as an organic artistic and literary movement: During the long, tropical summer that ended 1978 and rang in 1979, I joined a dozen or so young students, office workers, bank clerks, and intellectuals in the city of São Paulo who met weekly.... Every month, we poured over the new gay monthly publication *Lampião da Esquina* [*Corner Lamp*], produced by a collective of writers and intellectuals from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo that declared itself a vehicle for discussion on sexuality, racial discrimination, the arts, ecology, and machismo (Green 2013, 240).

These gay men, and queer-identified individuals, were struggling not only against a dictatorship, but also against a fierce Catholic antipathy towards them. The only tolerated outlet of deviance was Rio de Janeiro's Carnival, when anything could happen (and anything did), but the perception that such liberties spilled over into everyday life was mistaken, making open manifestations of queerness in everyday life dangerous (Posso 2003, 3, 7). The dictatorship, and the democracy that immediately followed it, judged public expressions of queerness as serious transgressions, necessary, perhaps, to define the proper boundaries of heterosexuality, whose limitations in turn circumscribed homosexuality: only the gay man who engaged in passive anal sex was labeled homosexual; everyone else was spared. The markers of heterosexual masculinity, then, were clearly articulated; from Pereleshin's perspective, as he repeatedly insisted, they were signified by the mustache, the wife, the children, and the dull, unthinkingly preordained existence. As long as those markers were present, even those men and boys who could be bought for sex by an older white man were not queer (Mitchell 2016, 124).

The Brazilians mentioned by Green, however, were seeing themselves increasingly as part of a sexual minority not necessarily defined by what sexual activities they preferred: it was a worldwide unification of queers that did not discriminate against male passivity, identifying by a character trait rather than an act. For Pereleshin it was a cause for a celebration expressed in the poems he sent to be published in English for gay literature anthologies.

What a change from his earlier Russian-language poems, in which he justified his homosexuality through historical associations with antiquity and a forgotten Russophone gay past. The visibility of the new gay movement gave Pereleshin an opportunity to stop self-censoring, providing him with the means to comprehend and translate his queer experience. Choosing to write in Portuguese gave him his freedom: Portuguese is the language in which he had sex, in which he seduced young men, in

which he could extoll a queer desire differentiated from, and ultimately elevated above, what he considered the breeding masses. The juxtaposition of gay enlightenment and dull reproduction became the principal theme of *In Old Wineskins* (*Nos Odres Velhos*, 1983), Pereleshin's sole published collection of Portuguese-language poetry.²

Most importantly, *In Old Wineskins* also reflects the influence of a young man Pereleshin met around 1977. Humberto Marques Passos was more than three decades younger than Pereleshin when they met in October, 1977, standing in line in a photocopy shop. They shared cultural interests and discussed word choice late into the night (Bakich 2015, 225, 242).³ Passos flattered and cajoled Pereleshin to write and publish his Portuguese-language work.

In 1979 the poet and literary critic Francisco Bittencourt (without Pereleshin's knowledge) sent a few of Pereleshin's poems to *Lampião* (the paper mentioned by Green and then Brazil's only gay publication) so they could be reviewed by a leading queer literary and artistic voice in Brazil, Glauco Mattoso.⁴ The short biography included in the resulting article notes that "Pereleshin, who was only writing in Russian, remains ignored among us, although he's already lived in Rio for 25 years." Mattoso comments that Pereleshin's preferred form, the sonnet, is "for these topics and in Portuguese so unused that it's as though it's a new form" (Mattoso 1979). That review marked a significant new recognition for Pereleshin, who was ecstatic that his poetry had been published in the journal—at last an audience, even if, ultimately, nothing much came of it.

That the review was published in *Lampião* highlights Pereleshin's poetic transformation. In 1978 the Brazilian gay journal was founded as a result of Winston Leyland's first visit to Brazil a year earlier (Encarnación 2016, 163; Green 2013, 249, 265). Leyland was in Rio in order to collect ideas for an anthology of Latin American gay literature (Trevisan 1986, 136; Green 2013, 249). James N. Green was helping Brazilian gay activists organize at the time; he and Leyland subsequently met in São Paulo (Leyland 2025b). As Leyland was influential in queer literary circles (he had been instrumental in publishing gay male literature in the United States—often erotic, such as the *Meat Men* series), that meeting convinced Brazilian gay writers to establish *Lampião* (Leyland 1979, 8).

Soon Leyland had an apartment in Copacabana, where he would periodically escape from the stress of being a publisher (Leyland, telephone conversation April 5, 2025). Leyland also met Pereleshin during that first visit to Brazil, at the urging of Simon Karlinsky, who felt that Pereleshin should be included in Leyland's Latin American anthology (Bakich 2025). Pereleshin then introduced Leyland to Passos, and the latter two

² At the same time, his decision to change languages was a conscious choice to try to reach a Brazilian readership. Despite his efforts, he always remained a Russian-language émigré poet with little recognition in Brazil or beyond.

³ Leyland claims that Passos also wrote poetry in his youth. That poetic connection gave Passos influence over Pereleshin. But the relationship, like that between Pereleshin and Vitkovskii earlier, was strained; Leyland has commented that Passos was distraught whenever Pereleshin said he loved him. (Leyland 2025a).

⁴ Bakich writes that it was Pereleshin himself who sent the poems to the journal after Leyland and Passos convinced him to do so (Bakich 2015, 246).

become close friends; Leyland even hired Passos as his financial representative for when Leyland was not in Rio. Leyland became convinced of Pereleshin's significance, and he included the poet's work in his planned anthology, giving Pereleshin another chance to engage with a large readership.

Leyland published his anthology, *Now the Volcano: An Anthology of Latin American Gay Literature*, two years later. It included four of Pereleshin's Russian-language poems—many of which were sexually frank—translated by Simon Karlinsky (Pereleshin 1979). Pereleshin (a recluse of sorts, “eccentric and difficult,” according to Leyland) was suddenly declaiming a proud gay future, in line with how Leyland himself marveled, in his own introduction to the volume, that “the Gay Cultural Renaissance is a world-wide phenomenon” (Leyland 1979, 6).

The first and longest of the four poems, “To One Who Confessed” (“Priznavshemusia”) begins with a raunchy comparison of homosexuality with animals: jack rabbits in China (whose name also serves as a swear word), and deer in Brazil, in order to create an extended analogy to the Brazilian slang word for a gay man, “veado” or “viado,” pronounced the same way (with the first word, “veado” also meaning “deer”). Yet through the bond of being called “viado” (queer, perhaps faggot, in English) a movement is created, with the recipients of the insults, through their evident connection to the natural world (deer, jack rabbits), joining together in fraternal unity. Pereleshin goes even further: it is Leyland's publishing, his *Gay Sunshine Journal* and *Orgasms of Light*, that are drawing queers together in a new global gay movement that is fighting for equality:

Глядите же: «Левшинский свет» — газета
С рисунками, статьями, интервью,
И целый том — стихи «Оргазмы света»:
И то, и то я на дом Вам даю.

Мы не одни. Поверьте, миллионы
За Лейландом идти готовы в бой
За равенство, за добрые законы,
За право жить и быть самим собой!
(Pereleshin 2018, 345)

Just look: *Lefthanded Light** — a journal
With drawings, articles, interviews,
And a whole book of poems — *Orgasms of Light*:

The one and the other I'll lend you to
take home.

We're not alone. Believe me, millions
Are ready to follow Leyland in the fight
For equality, for good laws,
For the right to live and be ourselves!⁵

*Pereleshin uses his term “left-hander”
to translate *Gay Sunshine*.

⁵ My translation. Karlinsky's translation is published in Pereleshin, “To the One Who Confessed,” *Now the Volcano* 264-65; *Out of the Blue* 184-85. The Russian original is in the Olga Bakich Archive, comprising Pereleshin's complete poetry in Russian and copies of his letters (the poetry, annotated with relevant sections from Pereleshin's correspondence, is currently in the author's possession), and Pereleshin 2018, 344-35. Pereleshin wrote the poem specifically for Leyland, sending a copy to Karlinsky for translation (Pereleshin 1977).

So much for the ethereal Pereleshin; to the barricades! Evidently for an American English-language readership Pereleshin is positioning his own work and experience at the vanguard of gay rights. But a poem such as “To One Who Confessed” is also a reflection of how Pereleshin’s sexuality is more changeable depending on the language he is using (or intending for publication if the work is to be translated by someone else). It is also a clear indication of the queer radicalization of his poetry, the result of his getting to know activists such as Leyland.

Leyland continued to publish Pereleshin’s works in translation. In the 1980 tenth anniversary issue of *Gay Sunshine Journal* (subsequently reprinted in *Gay Roots: Twenty Years of Gay Sunshine* in 1991), he published “To the Green-Eyed Boy” (Pereleshin 1991, 648). The translation is based on Pereleshin’s 1980 Portuguese reworking of a 1978 Russian poem, both of which were unpublished. Given that Pereleshin himself selected the poem for Leyland, it must have had personal importance, both in the event described and in the message he is giving the reader. As an example of Pereleshin’s self-translation the two poems are significant in that they are not only rewritten by the poet but also intended for yet a further translation into English.

Pereleshin’s self-translations reflect conscious decisions: he decided which poems to rework, thereby reflecting how his identities are constituted in different languages. “As a kind of multilingual palimpsest, the self-translated poetic text offers insights into the functioning of poetic creativity in different languages, the conundrum of translation, and the vagaries of bilingual identity” (Wanner 2020, 14). For Pereleshin, self-taught in Portuguese and learning the habits of its versification (such as the recognition that for Brazilian readers the sonnet was an awkward form), the effort was worthwhile, as his new poetic language offered a directness that he could not duplicate easily in his native Russian.

Does that new directness make for a new original (enough so that it was the Portuguese version—and not the Russian—that was translated and published by Leyland)? Which version is the true “original”? Given the two years that elapsed before Pereleshin decided to translate the poem, the motivations behind his reworking of the topic may differ enough that the new poem itself gains a new and different intent (Antunes 2009, 106). Pereleshin could allow himself flexibility, he could avail himself of “liberties of which regular translators would never dream; self-translation typically produces another ‘version’ or a new ‘original’ of a text. What is being negotiated is therefore not only an ‘original’ text, and perhaps the self which wrote it, but the vexatious notion of ‘originality’ itself” (Cordingley 2013, 2).

Pereleshin’s identity in his self-translations was new; he was free to (re-)situate himself linguistically and culturally, as “not only a means of representing one’s identity and particular way of thinking—seeing the self from the inside and outside, situated between others in different languages and spaces—but also as a particular writing activity in search of an effective channel of intercultural dialogue, one which can open a space for the enunciation of a diversity of voices, positions and sensibilities” (Klimkiewicz 2013, 190). It is not necessarily that he is rephrasing his homosexuality

differently, perhaps in a minoritizing discourse, as has been suggested (meaning reorienting his poems to the questions of gay identity prevalent at the time), but rather that the experience of his own homosexual desire is contextualized in the language he used in conversation with the many young men he addresses.⁶ It is a radical repositioning; for, as José Santaemilia has argued, “Translating the language of sex or pleasure, therefore, is not a neutral affair but a political act, with important rhetorical and ideological implications, registering the translator’s attitude toward existing conceptualizations of gender/sex identities, human sexual behavior(s) and moral norms” (Santaemilia 2018, 12).

Writing queer desire is a political act, one that asks the reader to engage in creating queer meaning. Pereleshin saw its impact in the Russian-speaking diaspora’s reaction to *Ariel*: clearly, those readers had little interest in co-creating queer meaning alongside him. By writing in Portuguese, Pereleshin assumed that his Brazilian readership would be different (even as he could not have intended to reach a worldwide audience by writing in Portuguese, or in Russian, for that matter). Queer poetry, as John Vincent writes, sees queer as an “imperative to read differently,” with lyric forms that “go against the grain of heteronormative reading practices so as to participate in the constructions of meaning that constitute each lyric” (Vincent 2002, xix). Pereleshin challenges us to see the world as he does, from different perspectives and in dialogue with himself, across time, space, languages, and cultures. He challenges the reader to sort out who the real Pereleshin is. Or, maybe more accurately, challenges himself to understand who he really is (Hokenson 2013, 54; Klimkiewicz 2013, 190).

But what of “To the Green-Eyed Youth”?⁷ This pair of poems reflects Pereleshin’s state of mind when he was working furiously with Humberto Passos on Portuguese poems (by 1980 Pereleshin had not yet published *In Old Wineskins*, although he and Passos were busily preparing it), when he was rethinking his earlier Russian poetic life, when, in fact, he was opening up to the new gay literary flowering Leyland had celebrated.

Зеленоглазому

«Твои зрачки — сверканье изумруда», —
Находится сравнение без труда,
Хотя оно — стоячая вода
И ничего не значит, кроме зуда.

To the Green-Eyed Youth

“Your pupils are the sparkling of an
emerald,” —
The comparison is found without effort,
Although it’s stagnant water

⁶ See Démont 162 and Leung, “Translating the Homoerotic” 46, 49 regarding minoritizing translations. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s minoritizing discourse was not intended to be a mode, necessarily, but rather a question about the intent and applicability of the queer experience (Sedgwick 1).

⁷ Pereleshin did not bequeath any copyright and wanted others to quote from his work freely (Bakich 2015, 291). I will be referring to the Portuguese version by the same title as the Russian, “To the Green-Eyed Youth” (as opposed to the “boy” used in the English translation), even though the literal rendering from the Portuguese is “To the Youth with Green Eyes.” For ease of reference I am providing citations indicating these and other poems’ locations in Pereleshin’s complete poetic works in Russian, published in Moscow (2018), or the appropriate source in the case of Portuguese-language works. All translations are my own, as are any errors in translation.

А для меня — великолепье чуда,
 Взлет и провал, победа и беда,
 Продленные неведомо куда
 Посул добра и предвещанье худа.
 Забудем же о девушке! Живи
 В рифмованном бессмертии любви
 Вне времени, надменной и нетленной
 И не жалея, давая ей отказ,
 Что юноши грядущих поколений
 Не воскресят таких зеленых глаз!
 12 July, 1978 (Pereleshin 2018, 170)

And doesn't mean anything other than an
 itch.
 But for me it's the magnificence of a miracle,
 Upward flight and downfall, victory and
 defeat,
 That are extended to no one knows where
 The promise of good and the foretelling of
 bad.
 Let's forget about the girl! Live
 In the rhymed immortality of love
 Outside of time, haughtier and imperishable
 And, don't regret, when giving her your
 refusal,
 That youths of future generations
 Won't be resurrecting such green eyes!

Ao Jovem de Olhos Verdes

"As tuas pupilas são esmeraldas..."
 Surge a metáfora já consagrada
 E tão banal que não revela nada
 Exceto certas manobras ribaldas.
 Quase desconhecido, tu me baldas
 Nas ramificações da minha estrada
 Com a duplicidade calculada,
 Com as pseudo-promessas que desfraldas!
 Quero-te para mim. Então, esquece
 A noiva, diz-lhe que "tudo acontece",
 Que não desejas nem filhos, nem netos,
 Que neles não é muito que tu perdes,
 Mas, multiplicados nos meus sonetos,
 Serão mais salvos os teus olhos verdes!
 4 March, 1980 (Pereliéchin 1980)

To the Youth with Green Eyes

"Your pupils are emeralds..."
 The already well-used and so banal metaphor
 Arises, revealing nothing
 Except certain ribald maneuvers.
 Almost a stranger, you thwart me
 And the ramifications of my intents
 With a calculated duplicity,
 With the pseudo-promises you unfurl!
 I want you for me. So, forget
 The fiancée, tell her that "things happen,"
 That you want neither sons nor grandsons,
 That they're not much that you'll lose,
 But that, multiplied in my sonnets,
 Your green eyes will be more secure!

The Russian version of "To the Green-Eyed Youth" opens with the same line as does the Portuguese, but with one word's difference: "Your pupils are the sparkling of an emerald" (Russian); "Your pupils are emeralds" (Portuguese). While the initial lines are similar, the Russian places more poetic distance between the poet and the youth, as signified by the intermediary word "sparkling," a choice of word that gives the reader a more distant approach to the youth's beauty, even as it also evokes cheap and clichéd poetry.

Both poems are centered on the narrator's (Pereleshin's) desire to be with this youth, but the Russian poem focuses, in the second stanza, on an emotional level of the impending conquest as filtered through the poet's desire. It is the chase that matters, despite the description of the only logical conclusion (to the poet writing the poem, at

least). Yes, the youth is already with a girlfriend, but that does not matter: “Let’s forget about the girl!” (“Zabudem zhe o devushke!”). The youth will live on in verse, in an immortal rhyme of love that is outside time and death: “Live / In the rhymed immortality of love / Outside of time, haughtier and longer-lasting” (“Zhivi / V rifmovannom bessmertii liubvi / Vne vremeni, nadmennei netlennei”). Future generations of youths, whoever they may be, will not lay claim to those emerald green eyes because Pereleshin will have immortalized them, outside of their other transmission, physical reproduction. Pereleshin is laying a poetic claim to the youth’s beauty, eager that he selfishly agree to be deified so that his beauty not be tarnished by heterosexuality and its implicit (explicit?) act of repetition, the tragedy of procreative sex. The rhymes emphasize the need to escape corporeality: “imperishable” and “generations” (“netlennei,” “pokolenii”), whereas refusing the girl brings him life, love, and the existence of his eyes: “live,” “love,” “refusal,” “eyes” (“zhivi,” “liubvi,” “otkaz,” “glaz”).

Pereleshin’s Portuguese-language parallel poem, however, has an edgier tone. Even the first stanza, in which the poet comments about the cliché he uses to describe the youth’s eternal beauty, seems more risqué, as the metaphor “arises” (“surge”), clearly, is part of his “ribald maneuvers” intended to bed the young man. (The sexual overtones are more emphatic in the Portuguese, as the verb “surgir” means not only “to arise,” but also “to arouse.”) And the stakes are higher, too: the girlfriend is a fiancée (or a new bride); the reason the young man is to give for jilting her is an effective “shit happens” (even if Pereleshin did not choose those exact words). What is the youth to give up? His sons and grandsons, his procreation.⁸ Even the rhymes highlight the price that must be paid: “forget” and “happens,” “grandsons” and “sonnets,” “lose” and “green,” meaning green eyes (“esquece,” “acontece,” “netos,” “sonetos,” “perdes,” “verdes”).

In both poems, the first two stanzas, while they follow Pereleshin’s typical sonnet rhyming structure, nonetheless are constructed around rhymes that are all so close in sound as to be almost identical. It is as though the situation is blurry, bleeding from one idea into the next as Pereleshin pursues his conquest. But, once the gambit is played, then the associations are clearer. The Portuguese reveals a rowdier sense of being gay; it also reveals a life experience—of Brazilian rent boys who saw no threat to their masculinity when being bought and paid for by an older (usually white and foreign) gay man (Mitchell 2016, 32-33). In both versions, however, the irony remains: the poet, indeed, has immortalized the green-eyed youth for eternity.

Since Pereleshin wrote poems regularly and consistently he did not write “To the Green-Eyed Youth” in a vacuum: the two versions exist within a cycle of other poems, whose topics serve to illuminate them. In 1978, four days before Pereleshin wrote the poem’s Russian version, he was once again haunted by Evgenii Vitkovskii, his Ariel. The result was “Not Ready!” (“Ne gotov!”):

⁸ These words, “filhos” and “netos,” could be translated as “children” and “grandchildren,” as well as “sons” and “grandsons.” Given the emphasis on the “youths of future generations” (“iunoshi griadushchikh pokolenii”), I feel that using the words referring to male progeny in the translation better reflects the masculine world that Pereleshin was creating.

Тому назад лет семь я занемог,
И, вот, опять в очередном припадке
Тропической — московской — лихорадки
Меня знобит: я до костей продрог.
(Pereleshin 2018, 169)

About seven years ago I fell ill,
And now, again, in another attack
Of tropical — Moscow — fever,
I'm shivering: I am chilled to the bone.

Later in the poem we learn that this illness, however, can lead to death, the only time when the poet will be able—at last—to reunite with his beloved Ariel. “I was ordered to prepare for the trip... Where there is peace—to the subterranean peaceful world” (“Mne veleno gotovit'sia k poezdke... Tuda, gde mir—v podmirnyi mirnyi mir”). Yet Ariel is not there, either.

For Pereleshin, Ariel (or more accurately, the poetic and ethereal idea of Ariel) is to be found in the glories of art and literature, those same treasures the poet promises to the green-eyed youth. In “To My Sun” (“Moemu solntsu”), three days before writing the first “To the Green-Eyed Youth,” Pereleshin turned to that same ultimate and comforting answer:

Тебя в руках Цветаева держала:
Ладони рук и губы жгла себе,
И при такой — не утолишь — алчбе
Не на себя, а за тебя дрожала.

Tsvetaeva held you in her arms:
She burned her palms and lips,
And with such unquenchable thirst
Not for herself, but for you, she trembled.

.....

.....

Теперь ты мой, и мы горим вдвоем,
Но в пламени, но в бешенство твоём
Я чувствую прохладные прослойки:

Now you are mine, and we burn together,
But in the flame, and in your fury
I feel the cool layers

Спаленных губ останки и сердец.
... Воистину, поэты огнестойки:
Сожженные, переживут конец.
(Pereleshin 2018, 169-70)

Of the remains of burnt lips and hearts.
... Truly, poets are fireproof:
Burnt, they will survive the end.

It is poetry that provides the escape from the torments of life, even as poetry itself remains a torment. For Pereleshin, writing that Marina Tsvetaeva, a major (bisexual) Russian poet, is sharing in the torment of everyday life and is burning with the gift of poetry, provides us with a larger frame for the Russian poem. He is thinking about the cycle of queer life and expression, about its suffering, its artistic possibilities, about its transcendence of time and place, about the fire—the sun—that is both the one who is desired and poetry itself.

What about after the Russian version of “To the Green-Eyed Youth” was written? The answer in “Why?” (“Dlia chego?”), written four days later, is more dejection. Why live a life? What is the point when everyone will end up in a coffin? What does love mean, then? Where are the beautiful young men for whom the poet has expended so much effort, physically, spiritually, and artistically?

Когда лежать я буду под доской,
Кто будет мне разглаживать сутану,

.....

Как вытерплю сонливую нирвану?
Ведь, я и сам любить не перестану
Своей любви крылатый непокой.

.....

Но и сегодня, дома,
Мне тишина забытости знакома,
Так для чего, скажите, я умру?

(Pereleshin 2018, 170-71)

When I'll be lying under the coffin lid,
Who will smooth out my cassock,

.....

How can I endure this drowsy nirvana?
After all, I myself will not cease to love
The winged restlessness of my love.

.....

But even today, at home,
I am familiar with the silence of oblivion,
So why, tell me, will I die?

How does physical love compare to spiritual love? Is desire why we are on this earth, and, if so, is it necessarily physical? Evidently, the green-eyed boy is the cause of these types of questions because of what he represents, in his beauty and its possibilities. Around the time of the Russian iteration of "To the Green-Eyed Youth" the boy was evidently a replacement for Evgenii Vitkovskii, a representative of gay love yet unattainable.

The Portuguese version of the poem, however, is situated within a context that reflects a shift in Pereleshin's perspective. He had been writing in Portuguese for a year by then: *In Old Wineskins* included many of his 1979 poems, racier answers to *Ariel's* original questions. The 1980 rewrite of "To the Green-Eyed Youth" follows in the same tradition, and, significantly, it was written after Pereleshin and Passos attended Carnival that year. No wonder, then, that the poems surrounding the 1980 translation and rewrite of "To the Green-Eyed Youth" are, in general, so much more sexually assertive.

Even the Russian-language poems written around that 1980 attendance at Rio's annual bacchanal are earthier, as is clear in the poem "Gymnos" ("Gimnos") written on the day that Pereleshin finished his new version of "To the Green-Eyed Youth."

Гимнос—по-гречески нагой,
гимнасий—под открытым небом
пустой участок, дорогой
невинно-влюбчивым эфебам.

Теперь «гимнаст» и «гимназист»
размежевались в обиходе:

.....

Я раздеваю циркача,
а отрок не прельстился платой
и ощетинился, ворча,
моралистической цитатой!

(Pereleshin 2018, 234)

Gymnos—in Greek, naked,
gymnasium—under the open sky
an empty area dear
to the innocently-amorous ephebes.

Now "gymnast" and "high school boy"
have become separated in general usage:

.....

I undress the circus actor,
but the lad was not tempted by the payment
and bristled, grumbling,
with a moralistic quotation!

The poem plays on the connection between Greek and Russian, between athleticism, nudity, teenage boys in high school and their amorous availability (both in the ancient Greek sense and on the contemporary streets of Rio). The temptations are magnified by the cross-lingual connections in meaning: every boy can be had, if only he would agree. The retelling of “To the Green-Eyed Youth” was not the only poem Pereleshin completed on March 4, 1980, however. The Portuguese-language poem “Duplicity” (“Duplicidade”) looks at similar events: the seduction of (unwilling) young men from the perspective of a poet who was doomed from the start. At the same time, his uniqueness as a poet, existing above the heterosexual masses, means he must resign himself to a reincarnation—in his artistic eternity—of more of the same.

Para os poetas eu não sou tão pequeno,
Embora viva entre tantos pigmeus,
Mas os cínicos e os epicureus,
Já os esqueci no carnaval terreno.

Among poets I am not so small,
Although I live among so many pygmies,
But the cynics and the epicureans,
I’ve already forgotten them in the earthly
carnival.

.....
Basta que na futura encarnação
Retenha o mesmo câncer de gigante
Na alma de um miserável artesão!

(Pereliéchin 1983, 30)

.....
It is enough that in the future incarnation
I may retain the same giant's cancer
In the soul of a miserable artisan!

The poet is cursed. But his greatness means that he must continue to write, continue to rise above, continue to desire, even if those young men can never be attained.

Two days after Pereleshin rewrote “To the Green-Eyed Youth” he also penned a poem in Russian and one in Portuguese. The Russian poem, “Maple” (“Klen”), revolves around autumn’s tearing away of the maple tree’s leaves, its mask that it proudly wears all summer, something Pereleshin equates to the men who strut with a pompous air. They, too, will have their masks stripped off, leaving them uncovered for all to see when autumn comes.

День-другой подожди,
и разучишься плакать:
истощатся дожди,
и останется слякоть.
Встреть остатками сил
нагому и огласку.
«Я когда-то носил
эту самую маску.»

(Pereleshin 2018, 235)

Wait a day or two,
and you will forget how to cry:
The rains will be depleted
and slush will remain.
With what remains of your strength meet
the naked and the public.
“I once wore
this very mask.”

Autumn is the end of the cycle of birth and death, when all are unmasked to be revealed as who they really are. But there is a lesson: to understand that the mask is part of the game, a necessity even as it is removed (something Pereleshin learned over time).

In that day's Portuguese poem, a similar mask is torn off in a different setting: on a theatre stage, where all are playing their parts. Now Pereleshin is Romeo, but a Romeo not interested in the "pseudo-romantic" Juliet, a Romeo who upsets the performance by giving a flower to a man, thereby even making the prompter blush. But is it a mistake or a revelation of the truth? After all, it is Mercutio who becomes jealous, thereby unmasking the hidden plot, unspoken, of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, at least as understood by Pereleshin.

Na cena eu precisava de coragem,
Quando a pseudo-romântica Julieta
Fingiu paixão e, fazendo careta,
Já preparava a rápida abordagem.

Eu devia submeter-me à montagem
Conforme o plano do famoso poeta,
Mas do buquê tirei uma roseta,
E dei a flor ao belíssimo pagem!

.....

Gargalhou todo o elenco divertido,
Mercúcio se enciumou, e na cabina
O "ponto" enrubesceu, mal-entendido.

(Perelechin 1983, 31)

In the scene I needed courage,
When the pseudo-romantic Juliet
Pretended to be passionate and, making a face,
Was already preparing a quick approach.

I had to submit to the setting
According to the famous poet's plan,
But from the bouquet I took a rosette,
And gave the flower to the handsome page!

.....

Amused, the whole cast burst out laughing,
Mercutio became jealous, and in the booth
The prompter blushed, misunderstood.

Remarkably, this poem is titled in English: "God Supposes," winking not only to Shakespeare but also to the idea that God's plans may not always be what we make them out to be, that Juliet may well be deceived. The audience may be laughing, but Pereleshin is queering Shakespeare's intentions. Still, questions are left unanswered. What is the mask that Pereleshin is removing on stage, the mask that he is calling out in Shakespeare, flustering the prompter? It is the mask of compulsory heterosexuality, the shedding of his poetic drag to reveal the man underneath. It is the maple whose autumn is making it losing its cover, leaving it spindly and defenseless.

Pereleshin understood his predicament all too well. Despite his turn towards gay pride, he realized that his desire was grounded in the chasm caused by age—between his more advanced years and the age of those he lusted after—and by the death of physical desire even as poetic desire could live on for eternity. While the green-eyed youth would continue forever, spiritually in Russian and carnally in Portuguese, the desire itself would fade away.

"The Meeting with the Past," written in Russian in 1976 and rewritten in Portuguese in 1980, two months after "To the Green-Eyed Youth" was translated, makes his predicament clear. Time, as represented by both a meal and the men sharing the food, has erased any former attraction. Pereleshin's lust has dissipated, and the boy (the Russian poem is dedicated to a young man Pereleshin had found physically and culturally engaging almost a decade earlier) has opted for a typical heterosexual life, as can be seen in the Russian version below:

Встреча с прошлым
Алмиру Андраде

Всё Хроносу глотателю равно:
От падали до соловьиных грудок,
От ясеня до робких незабудок,
От Рубенсов до плохоньких панно.

Так: никому сберечь не суждено
Ни плоть, ни дух, ни разум, ни
рассудок,
Да я и сам в объемистый желудок
Нежеванным сползаю заодно.

Обжора сыт — и даже до отрыжки:
Горчат во рту безвидные излишки —
Горошины, волокна колбасы...

—«Тому семь лет меня вы отличали
За красоту».—А я гляжу в печали
На тусклый лоб, на глупые усы.

(Pereleshin 2018, 98)

The Meeting with the Past
To Almir Andrade

Everything is the same to Chronos the Devourer:
From carrion to nightingale breasts,
From ash trees to timid forget-me-nots,
From Rubens to inferior panels.

So no one is fated to hold on to
Either flesh, or breath, or mind, or reason,
Indeed, I too find myself descending
Unchewed into this voluminous stomach.

The glutton is full — even to the point of
belching:
Formless excesses leave a bitter taste
In his mouth — peas, sausage fibers...

“Seven years ago you singled me out
For my beauty.” — But I look in sadness
At the dull brow, at the stupid mustache.

What is it, then, that remained a constant in both his Russian identity and the new linguistic identity Pereleshin had constructed by 1980? Age. The irredeemable pull of heterosexuality for the right-handed majority. Everything is destroyed by time: flowers, Rubens, his own verse as well as the object of his desire who inspired that verse. It no longer matters whether the poet is an artist or not, desiring beauty or not; everyone, including the formerly desirable young man, is consumed by time's ravenous appetite, leaving only a bitter taste. We are left with the result of time's passage: the young man who used to be enchanting is now identical to everyone else (as signified by the mustache), digested by boring expectation, made stupid by his heterosexuality.⁹ The potential the poet had offered to the green-eyed youths in all their incarnations was not taken.

Pereleshin's turn to a poetic gay identity occurred because of several circumstances: the Russian diaspora's rejection of *Ariel* and Pereleshin's subsequent decision to write in Portuguese, his friendship with Simon Karlinsky, his chance encounter with Humberto Passos and acquaintanceship with Winston Leyland, the appearance of a gay community in Brazil and worldwide. These events formed the framework for a radically different Pereleshin, a poet who decided to join a new gay male reality, a reality that he then recorded in his Portuguese reworkings of earlier Russian-language poems as well as in his curated selection of works to be published in English. That reality reflected the way cultural and linguistic translation, diaspora, and sexual identity interacted in both his creative and personal life. “To the Green-Eyed Youth” exemplifies this fundamental shift in Pereleshin's conception of self: the poem's circumstances, and the accompanying

⁹ The Portuguese version, while it has different initial imagery, ends with the same dejection.

poetry surrounding its original version (and its subsequent translation into Portuguese and English), serve as a record of his queer self-translation, of the impact those influences had on his artistic and personal sense of self. The poem's trajectory maps the growth of a bold, new Pereleshin seeking to claim a queer place of his own, a poet who did not write in isolation but instead chose to engage with the gay world, changing it and being transformed by it in turn.

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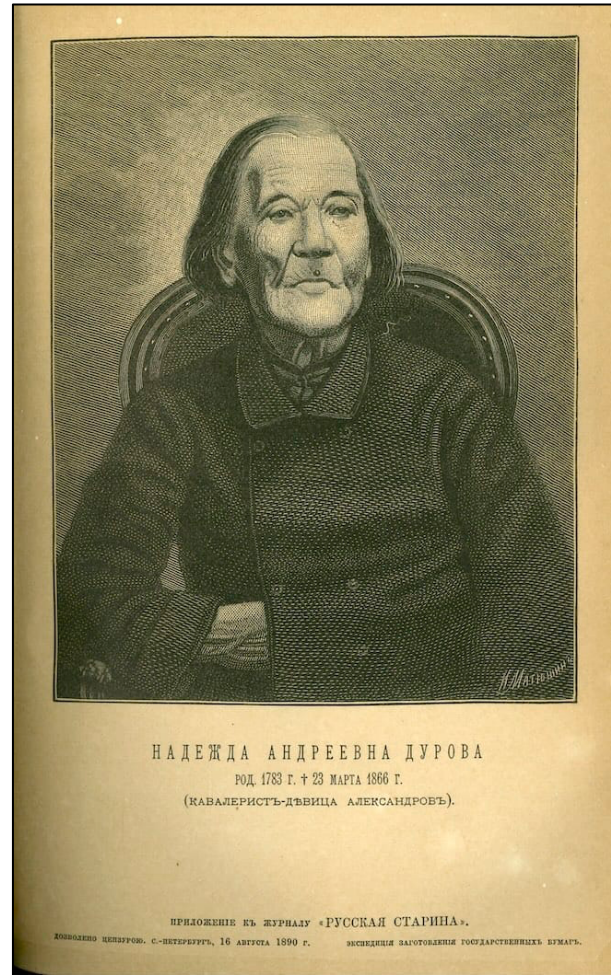
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Aleksandr Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Durova): Two Biographical Accounts

Aleksandr Aleksandrov (1783-1866) was a Russian-Ukrainian hero of the Napoleonic wars and a celebrated trans author. His autobiography, *Notes of a Cavalry Maiden* (1836), popular with nineteenth-century Russian readers, offered a first-person account of its protagonist's gender transition. In 1806, Aleksandrov, who was assigned female at birth, joined the Russian army and served in several military campaigns. Two years later, by the Tsar Alexander I's special decree, he was awarded the Cross of St. George and was officially allowed to use the name "Aleksandrov." In 1817 Aleksandrov retired with the rank of Captain-Lieutenant and lived the rest of his life wearing civilian male clothes.

Despite—or because of—Aleksandrov's obvious gender nonconformity, *Notes* (signed by what nowadays would be called his deadname "Nadezhda Durova") has maintained an important place in Russian culture and popular military history for nearly two centuries. Two separate English translations of the work appeared in 1988 and, as a result, *Notes* are now often included in British and North American university curricula. However, Aleksandrov's transmasculine self-presentation, evident in the gendered grammar of the original Russian, was mostly lost in translation. Moreover, few secondary sources that could provide clues about how the public perceived Aleksandrov's gender identity have been translated into English.

The two articles translated below first appeared in Russian popular history periodicals after Aleksandrov's death in 1866. As overlooked examples of nineteenth-century trans life-writing, they demonstrate the surprisingly respectful attitudes to Aleksandrov's gender nonconformity in the Russian Empire of that period, evident in the use of pronouns and grammatical endings.



Nadezhda Andreevna Durova (Cavalry Maiden Aleksandrov) *Russkaia starina*, 1891, vol. 79, p. 209. (Courtesy of the Bodleian Library)

These translations were completed as a part of a collaborative project funded by the University of St Andrews, Scotland. The English translations were produced by two undergraduate students, Charlotte Farrar and Charlotte Thomas, and then reviewed by the project's two sensitivity readers, Cheryl Morgan and Lev Nikulin. The translations were edited by Margarita Vaysman and Connor Doak, scholars of Russian queer cultures, and Esther Jones Russel, copyeditor with specialization in Russian.

Nadezhda Andreevna Durova. Materials for Her Biography.

Source: F.F. Lashmanov, "Nadezhda Andreevna Durova. Materialy k ee biografii. Report," *Russkaia starina*, 1890 (67/9), 657-665.

Translated and edited by Charlotte Farrar, with Lev Nikulin, Cheryl Morgan, Esther Jones Russel, and Margarita Vaysman.

Born 1790, Died 1863

Much has been said, both in print and in society, about the cavalry maiden Durova. Many have commented on her military life. All of this is now beginning to fade from memory, and only the first period of Durova's life—her upbringing and time in the military, which were documented in print—remain for posterity. As for the later period of Durova's life, her last days, nothing remains but rumors distorting the truth. Published documents note neither the time nor the place of death of this remarkable person, let alone the circumstances preceding that event. The goal of this short essay is to lift the veil, even if just a little, on Nadezhda Andreevna Durova's final act. Having at my direct disposal some of Durova's letters, her photograph, which was taken a few days before her death, as well as other information, I hope—a least partially—to succeed in this task.

F.L.

1.

At the beginning of the 1840s, retired Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandr Andreevich Aleksandrov left the city of Sarapul to settle in the town of Elabuga in the Viatka province.

To the day she died, N.A. Durova could not bear to be called by her existing female name, and so hereafter I shall refer to her by the name given to her, or rather authorized, by Emperor Aleksandr I in 1807.

No one knew why Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandrov moved away, but everyone knew that this “Captain-Lieutenant” was only a pseudonym for that “girl hussar.” Almost every day, people were drawn to Sarapul from surrounding villages to gawk at him, and that is not to mention the ordinary people in Sarapul itself, who would not give the lady Knight of St. George even a moment’s peace. Many believed that Aleksandrov had decided to leave his birthplace after his father’s death (his mother had died earlier) to erase forever from his heart the very memory of his female origin. Whatever the reasoning, here in Elabuga he was not disturbed as much, although during his first few days, of course, there was a crowd of curious onlookers.

At that time, the post of the police master in Elabuga was held by one Eduard Osipovich Erlich, a pleasant and sociable German. He was the first person in the city with whom Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandrov had to become acquainted. Happily for Aleksandrov, the police master turned out to be more than pleasant and offered rooms in his own apartment to the newcomer. Yet Aleksandrov, not wishing to burden anyone, rejected this invitation and instead rented himself a house on the very same street as the police master.

Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandrov’s only servant—a valet—was the retired serviceman Stepan (whose last name no one can remember). Stepan served his master the way a nanny serves a young child. He was a jack of all trades: he was a yard-keeper and a chef, could act as an experienced valet when required, and was an excellent messenger. In short, depending on the circumstances, he was able to take on any kind of job in his undemanding master’s household. This might well explain why Aleksandrov loved his Stepan so much!

In the winter and in cold weather, the captain-lieutenant wore a *burka* [a sheepskin overcoat worn by the cavalry]; in the summer, a *razletaika* [a grey, sleeveless officer’s overcoat], and he was always dressed in an officer’s coat with no epaulets, with the cross of St. George in the buttonhole.

Owing to his easy disposition and gentle character, Aleksandrov soon acclimated to his new place of residence. His once-distant relationship with police master Erlich quickly evolved into one of closeness and friendship, so that after only a week the captain-lieutenant already was almost a daily visitor to Erlich’s hospitable home.

The residents of Elabuga were soon convinced that the valiant captain-lieutenant possessed a kind and sympathetic heart. They therefore concluded that it would be foolish not to take advantage of the captain-lieutenant’s emerging friendship with Erlich for their own benefit. So the residents of Elabuga suddenly brought all their squabbles and slanders, arguments, petitions, and petty problems to Aleksandrov, who had not anticipated receiving such a swarm of requests.

The onslaught was immediate... Everybody—whether offended or not, whether in the right or the wrong—made their way to the captain-lieutenant, hoping he would provide them with some defense and support for their demands. Before he knew it, Aleksandrov was flooded with such requests. Not having the strength to refuse anyone,

he unwittingly became an advocate for nearly every resident, not only of Elabuga, but also of the surrounding villages.

At first, the police master laughed heartily at the captain-lieutenant's mediation, but once he realized that the number of 'petitioners' was multiplying, that they were increasingly impudent, and recognizing, finally, that Aleksandrov was the victim of their unscrupulous exploitation, the kindly old Erlich began to evade these petitions, thinking this would cool the petitioners' zeal somewhat. This did little to rectify the situation, however, and Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandrov continued to listen steadfastly to the numerous requests of his clients and report them "to most kind Eduard Osipovich."

The old police master often sat at his desk to work. At such times, it must be noted, Erlich could not tolerate any sort of distraction from or interruption of his work ... but suddenly Stepan would appear with a note from his master.

The old man would grimace. "Well, here we go—yet another request!" he would grumble, reading the note he had just received.

"Fine. Tell him the request will be granted!" he would say, turning to the captain-lieutenant's valet.

Stepan always answered the police master's usual remarks in the same manner: "Yes, your honor!" and then would quickly disappear from the room in a way that was nearly incomprehensible, given his huge height.

The notes sent by Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandrov nearly always had the same content and included request after request on behalf of his "clients." I offer a few of these notes as examples.

1.

"Eduard Osipovich! Do my *protégé* a kindness, permit him and his brother to build a house, or, at the very least, give them some small jobs for pay. They would like to take advantage of the autumn season to do whatever they can to prepare for the coming spring. Your sincerely devoted servant Aleksandrov."

2.

"This little lady here is crying and pleading that someone has planted a stolen harness on her husband. Be kind to her, Eduard Osipovich. Your servant Aleksandrov."

3.

"Eduard Osipovich! Would you do this soldier's wife a favor and give her some sort of lodging? She's asking for a 'profitable' one, and I really don't understand what she means. I only request that, if possible, you give her this lodging. *Devoué Alexandroff.*"

Later, the residents of Elabuga learned of another of the captain-lieutenant's weaknesses: his love for... animals—particularly cats and dogs.

This discovery, which was particularly important for street boys and old maids, caused a real stir. At first, many people refused to believe it, but when eyewitnesses confirmed that the captain-lieutenant did indeed have an entire menagerie of animals, these skeptics finally were silenced and forced to admit that nature is too strong to fight; at the age of 40-50, all single women inevitably become old maids...

These circumstances resulted in the rapid transformation of Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandrov's apartment into a veritable shelter for dogs and cats. Despite the unpleasant smell this produced throughout the house and despite Stepan's antipathy toward these poor, defenseless animals, the captain-lieutenant did not reconsider his attitude to them... Full credit for this must be given to the zealous young residents of Elabuga. Thanks to the "activities" of the street boys, the number of residents in captain-lieutenant's harem kept increasing. Yet this situation did not in the least trouble Aleksandrov, who only smiled at his acquaintances' ambiguous comments. Stepan was dreadfully unhappy with his master's strange "inclinations" and tried with all his might to counteract them. In response to his master's remarks that "blessed is he who has mercy on cattle," Stepan remained silent, and only on his way out would grumble (but in such a way that the master could not help but overhear), "blessed...unless these 'cattle' give them no peace...." Having reached such an opinion, Stepan would report to his master quite frequently that such-and-such dog was not there anymore, or that such-and-such cat had gone missing. "Wherever could have they gone?" the captain-lieutenant would ask him in bewilderment. Unperturbed, the loyal servant would reply without blinking an eye, "I don't know, your honor."

A band of street boys countered Stepan's efforts, generously supplying Aleksandrov with small animals. These rascals tormented the captain-lieutenant's loyal servant until he would turn to drink from sheer despair. The fact is that these boys created a profitable business of sorts from the captain-lieutenant's weakness for small animals. Just as soon as they learned of the appearance of a new family of cats or dogs, the little "businessmen" would quickly appear to take these defenseless creatures (the owners, of course, were always glad to decrease their number of household animals) and then would drag them past the captain-lieutenant's windows when Aleksandrov's faithful squire was not at home. In front of the windows the little animal would begin to squeal mercilessly, for the boys pinched it so that it would sing those heart-breaking melodies!

The captain-lieutenant would shout from the window, "What are you good-for-nothings doing here?" "Well, your honor," even these street urchins dared not call Durova otherwise, "we'd like to drown this little kitten in the river." "Ah, you vile boys," fumed the captain-lieutenant, "give it here." Then the small four-legged creature would go straight into Aleksandrov's keeping, while a small silver coin would appear in the hands of the young "executioners."

And so, the life of Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandrov continued modestly and quietly in the town of Elabuga.

In his spare time during the evenings, the police master received a group of his close friends; among their number was, of course, Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandrov. The police

master always heartily welcomed the captain-lieutenant and was glad to spend his free time with him. Yet, despite such a cordial relationship, the captain-lieutenant often quarreled with the police master, and did so quite earnestly. What exactly was the cause of such disagreements between them? The cause was very simple.

The police master, regardless of his innate goodness and desire to show kindness to Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandrov, often lost his temper. Since he was receiving notes from Aleksandrov nearly every single day with requests on behalf of his petitioners, the good-hearted old man got no peace. At such moments, the police master resorted to a cruel method. This method always gave him around three weeks of freedom from the pleasure of looking into various slanders and squabbles... In essence, the method was not so cruel. The police master usually met the captain-lieutenant with the words, "Hello, dear Aleksandr Andreevich!... Please, come on in..."; but sometimes, in the same circumstances he would say, "Ah, my esteemed Nadezhda Andreevna, how do you do?" Then, as if recollecting himself, he would add, "Oh, please excuse me. I mistook you for a woman of my acquaintance..."

Following such a greeting, the captain-lieutenant's face would first turn bright red, then deathly pale. A minute later the "captain-lieutenant" would stand up and leave the room.

Two or three weeks later, the police master and the captain-lieutenant would make peace and resume their friendship until the phrase "Hello, Nadezhda Andreevna!..." would be used again.

That's how Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandrov passed his time in the town of Elabuga. He maintained this mode of life until his death. The "captain-lieutenant" experienced so much, saw so much in his lifetime: 1807, 1812, then the war for the liberation of the nations ... it all passed like a dream before the eyes of the hero who was already dying. He lived through the great day of 19 February 1861 [abolition of serfdom in the Russian Empire]; he met with new kinds of people, saw the foundation of new regimes, new institutions... But he did not have long to observe the dawn of this new life; in 1863, the poor "captain-lieutenant" was no more... With his death the "animal shelter" shut down and his devoted servant, Stepan, disappeared without a trace... This remarkable person left only a memory of himself behind.

Before the end of her life, Nadezhda Andreevna Durova requested that she be buried under the name Aleksandr, but the priest did not find it possible to fulfil this dying wish. And so, the name of Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandr Andreevich Aleksandrov disappeared with him who bore it honestly and scrupulously until the last moments of his life!



Istoricheskii vestnik, 55 (1894), p. 701

Durova died, as I said, in the year 1863 at the age of 74, and was buried in the town cemetery (see photographs) under a modest monument, carved from a single stone and in the form of a four-pointed cross.

In 1888, during his stay in his father's hometown, Lieutenant I. E., the son of police master Erlich, visited Durova's grave, but the monument was nowhere to be found; the very site of the grave had been washed away by rain and was overgrown by dense thistles and grass. The gravestone had sunk into the ground but was later lifted out

and replaced in its original position, following the orders of one Mr. Ushkov.

Once, when I dropped in to the home of my friend, the Lieutenant Erlich whom I mentioned above, we discussed the remarkable people who had lived at the end of the past century and the beginning of the new one. It was here, incidentally, that Erlich told me about his father's acquaintance with N.A. Durova and about the last part of her life in the town of Elabuga, sharing, essentially, the information that I have presented above. Rummaging in his desk drawer, Erlich found a few of Durova's authentic notes, her photograph, a photograph of the town cemetery, and a copy of her service record. All of this he left completely at my disposal. Lieutenant Erlich's story was complemented by the notes of his father's widow, who was also personally acquainted with Durova. As for the second picture—the one of the cemetery—I have to say that this photograph belonged to Captain G.A.E., who suggested that it be printed in this essay, if found to be necessary. The outcome of our conversation was the appearance in print of our brief essay.

F. F. Lashmanov

Appendix

Service record, Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Andreevna Durova)

By the order of his Majesty, Emperor Aleksandr Pavlovich, the Ruler of All of Russia, etc., etc., etc.

Issued by the Inspectorate Department of the General Staff of his Imperial Majesty to *shtabs-rotmistr* [Captain-Lieutenant] Aleksander Aleksandrov, retired from army service at the age of 24, coming from a noble Russian family, with his father in possession of five male peasant souls, registered for service in the Mariupol' Hussar regiment at the rank of

cornet [junior officer] on 31 December 1807, transferred to the Lithuanian Uhlan regiment on 1 April 1811. Awarded the rank of *poruchik* [lieutenant] 29 August 1812. Took part in campaigns: 1807 in Prussia against the French forces; in battles: near the village of Guttstadt, pursuing the enemy towards the river Passarge and in the battle of Gelsberg, for which remarkable service he was awarded a military order; in 1812 against the same army in Russia, in various battles: 27 June in the village of Mir, 2 July in the village of Romanov, 16 and 17 July by the village of Dashkova, 4 and 5 August in the city of Smolensk, 15 August in the village of Lushki, 20 August by the city of Ezhatsk Pristan', 20 August by the monastery of Kolotsk, 24 August in the village of Borodino, where he received a contusion of the leg from a cannon ball and was sent away to recuperate; in 1813 he returned to service in a reserve detachment, with which he served in the Duchy of Warsaw during the blockade of the Modlin Fortress, from 10 August to 20 October, and during the blockade of the cities of Hamburg and Harburg. He was on leave from 9 to 15 March 1812 and returned to service at the required date. He incurred no fines, and a year ago, in 1816, retired from service with the rank of *shatbs-rotmistr* on the grounds of ill health. As proof, this order of his Imperial Majesty was issued in St Petersburg. 24 April 1817. True copy signed deputy-director general-major (surname illegible). Head of Department, civil servant of the fifth rank Kiselev. Seal of the authentic document of the Imperial Department of General Staff of his Imperial Majesty's Fifth Department.

February 1889, Nizhnii Novgorod. Report. by F.F. Lashmanov.

Durov-Aleksandrov

(Biographical note)

Source: N.A. Kutshe, "Durov-Aleksandrov (Biograficheskaiia zametka)," *Istoricheskii vestnik*, 55 (1894), 788–93.

Translated and edited by Charlotte Thomas, with Lev Nikulin, Cheryl Morgan, Esther Jones Russel, and Margarita Vaysman (eds.)

In 1890, the biography of the famous heroine and author Nadezhda Andreevna Durova-Aleksandrova (Chernova by marriage), written by S. Nekrasova, was published in the September issue of the journal *Historical Messenger*. In it, the author of the biography expressed her regrets that almost no information was available about the period of Durova-Aleksandrova's life in Elabuga, the town where she lived for the final twenty-five years of her life.

I would like to fill this gap with the help of testimonials by those contemporaries of hers who live in Elabuga to this day and who knew Durova well. However, the information and facts of Durova's life that I have collected are not interesting enough to

be discussed in great detail. Durova's everyday life was too repetitive and monotonous; each day was the same as the others for over a quarter of a century.

She settled in Elabuga at the start of 1841, having permanently ended her literary career with the publications *Iarchuk*, *the Ghost-Seeing Dog* and *Corner*. Critics had given Durova's final works a rather cool reception. In his notes on *Iarchuk*, the renowned critic Vissarion Belinskii (1811–1848) stated that readers "struggled to understand anything in this mass of incoherent fables." Such is our modern literature! You see in a pile of books one with the name of an author (Durova, that is) whose first works demonstrated remarkable talent. You grab it eagerly, but what then? You read two or three pages and give up... Nothing is worse than betrayed expectations, nothing is harder than leafing through a chest of books "only to say that, after all, they don't need to be read."ⁱ

It is difficult to say for certain what compelled her to fall completely silent and throw down her pen. I do not think, however, that it was linked to an insulted author's ego, a lack of material, or a decline in physical and mental fortitude. Rather, her turbulent and ebullient military life and her intensive literary work (in her late career, she wrote a new novella nearly every day) gave way to a reaction in which indifference and apathy toward everything replaced energy and liveliness. She devoted herself to an utterly calm life devoid of any anxieties, a life that dragged on day in and day out.

She always rose very early—a habit she had picked up during her prior military life, bolstered, no doubt, by the barks, yelps, and growls of a whole pack of seven or eight dogs. Durova loved dogs with a passion. Taking care of the dogs took up the best part of her day, served as the main source of her thoughts and cares, and gave her the greatest pleasure, joy, and comfort. How long it must have taken to bathe, feed, and nurse this pack. At seven or eight o'clock in the morning she would walk the dogs, and woe to anyone who got it into his head to hurt them. Some paid for this seriously and were taken to court by her.

She always wore male attire: a long black frock coat and narrow trousers, a tall black hat on her head, and in her hands a cane, on which she leaned. She endeavored to walk as upright as her years and strength allowed and had a firm step. She always conducted herself as a man and was offended if anyone addressed her as a woman; if this happened, she would get angry and respond harshly. In one of her apartments, instead of displaying a calling card in the window, she had the name *Durov* engraved on the windowpane.

After her walk, she would return home and drink tea, which she loved a great deal. The dogs would sit at and under the table and also would have their tea. At six or seven in the evening she would go for a walk again and would occasionally call on one of her neighbors on business related to her modest household. She was a cheerful conversationalist and very witty; she behaved simply and with no pretensions, which, according to one of her acquaintances, was a rarity at the time, "especially from a person who held the rank of colonel."

ⁱ Writings of V. Belinskii, Moscow, 1859, part IV, p.128.

There were not many people in her immediate circle with whom she had a close friendly relationship other than K. Spasskii, the priest at the St. Nicholas Church, and the wife of the warden of the regional college, S—skaia. She was acquainted with Father Petr Kuliginskii, the priest of the Pokrov Church and author of several texts on local regional history.ⁱⁱ Unfortunately, the notes and memoirs of this well-educated person, from which much information on Durova could have been gleaned, were passed on to a relative and lost. She visited her brother, former police master in Elabuga, very rarely and only out of necessity, mostly on feast days and birthdays. She did not maintain a correspondence with anyone and only wrote to her son on rare occasions. However, none of her acquaintances remembers her son coming to visit her in recent years. In general, it is said that the relationship between mother and son was cold, as if they were strangers to each other.

Durova did not like to remember the days of her former glory, her brave exploits and turbulent life; she could hardly be persuaded to talk about them, and her answers would be short and monosyllabic. How can one explain that? It was as if she was afraid to recall that distant past—which felt like a happy dream to her—so as to avoid troubling her spirit and disturbing her heart. No one saw her don her military uniform even on very important occasions and she avoided all public gatherings and celebrations.

She was more than indifferent to her literary fame and did not even keep her manuscripts. Some of them were gifted by her footman to his acquaintances. Until recently a manuscript describing her military campaigns was kept in the household of F—n. One can suppose this was an excerpt from her *Notes of a Cavalry Maiden*.

She lived modestly, but did not deny herself anything; she spent the entirety of her 1000-ruble pension and when she died her savings amounted to just one ruble. She had one footman for a servant; he served her until her death, bought himself a house, and amassed a small capital. According to S—v, he still lives in Kazan, now a decrepit old man.

Prior to her death, she led an even more withdrawn and solitary life. Without exaggerating, one could say that her sole preoccupation was her dogs—she cared for them, bitterly mourned their deaths, and even, as was the case in S—v's house, dug a grave for them in the garden herself.

Durova died quietly and calmly on 21 March 1866 at the age of 82. On 24 March, her friend K. Spasskii, archpriest of the St. Nicholas Church, escorted her mortal remains to the cemetery of Trinity Church, where she was buried. "The funeral of the Cavalry Maiden was honored by the local cadre battalion with an appropriate military convoy that escorted her body to the grave. An officer carried the Cross of St. George. Very few mourners attended the sad ceremony, as the procession was held very early."ⁱⁱⁱ

In the register of the St. Nicholas Church for 1866, No. 2632, Part 3, the deceased is described as follows: "Deceased March 21st, 1866, buried March 24th, Staff Cavalry

ⁱⁱ I published a biographical note about him in the *Calendar of the Viatka Province*, 1893, under the title 'Priest P.N. Kuliginskii.'

ⁱⁱⁱ No. 40 *Vyatka Provincial Gazette* of 1866.

Master according to identification #2362 issued for retirement on April 24th, 1817, a noblewoman by birth and baptism, Nadezhda Andreevna Durova.” In the column on age, she was marked as having been 73 years old, and the cause of death was stated as “old age.” Meanwhile, her gravestone lists her age as 78, and the date of death as 29 March 1866, whereas in her biography, published in the 1866 *Viatka Province Gazette*, her age was given as 73 and the date of death as 22 March. Without a doubt, she died on 21 March 1866, as recorded in the register by Archpriest Spasskii, but owing to a lack of information, he could not have known for certain her age at the time of death and approximated it as 73. Had Durova been 73 at the time of her death, then she would have been born in 1793, and not 1783, as is generally accepted. Yet it is known that Durova married Chernov on 25 October 1801, which refutes the above claims about her age. Finally, in the *Historical Messenger*, Mrs. Nekrasova indicates 1783 as the year Durova was born, in accordance with an excerpt from the register.

Soon after Durova’s death, a modest tombstone was erected by her admirer and friend, Str—skaia. It consisted of a stone slab six quarters long [1.08m], four quarters high [72cm], three quarters wide [54cm] at the top, and two [36cm] at the bottom. 25 years passed. Some of Durova’s friends died, others had left Elabuga, among them St-skaia. The tombstone was covered with sand, overgrown with moss and grass, receded into the ground, and the inscription on it could only be made out with the greatest difficulty, so it is not surprising that it was later somewhat restored. In 1890, Fadikhin, a tradesman who knew Durova in his youth, raised the slab from the ground, coated it in paint and redid its inscription in the same form it had been before, and according to him, adding only the final words. From the attached image, we can see that the epitaph reads as follows:

Here lie the ashes of the servant of God
Nadezhda Andreevna Durova-
Aleksandrov.
Deceased 29th March 1866,
at 78 years of age.
As restored by F. P. Fadikhin

As often tends to happen, the monument was not restored by some rich person (of whom there are many in Elabuga who personally knew Durova), but by a tradesman who did not do it for any selfish or aggrandizing reasons, but out of the kindness of his heart, “in fond memory,” as he puts it, “of the once-famous female warrior.”

In conclusion, I must say that the title of my biographical note, Durov-Aleksandrov, was chosen for a reason. Durova always considered herself to be a man, wore male clothing, aspired to imitate a male manner, voice, and gait, and did not permit herself to be addressed otherwise, particularly after Tsar Aleksandr I ordered her to call herself Aleksandrov. Let her be remembered in posterity as Durov-Aleksandrov, according to her own desire.

P.S. We learned recently that a citizen of Elabuga, P.K.U., intends to place a marble bust on Durova's grave. All that remains is to wish that this wonderful idea be put into practice as soon as possible.

Brian James Baer and Yevgeniy Fiks, eds., *Queer(ing) Russian Art: Realism, Revolution, Performance*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023. 402 pp.

Although recent years have seen a rise in queer scholarship in Slavic Studies, relatively few such works have tackled the region's visual arts. Yet, as coeditors Brian James Baer and Yevgeniy Fiks note astutely in their introduction to *Queer(ing) Russian Art: Realism, Revolution, Performance*, "there could be, perhaps, no more apt time for a book on this subject" (12). Indeed, since the establishment of the Russian Federation's "gay propaganda law" in 2013, homophobia and transphobia have become more pronounced than ever in official Russian discourse. In the United States, too, recent and ongoing shifts in the political climate have placed queer people and scholarship under increasing pressure. Meanwhile, in both Western and post-Soviet contexts, the culture surrounding art history has been plagued by revisionist attempts to downplay or altogether erase the importance and influence of queer artists and queer art—see, for example, the 2019 Amazon prime series *Amazing Leonardo* and Kirill Serebrennikov's 2022 biopic *Tchaikovsky's Wife*, each of which has been criticized for a (mis)handling of well-documented homosexuality. It is more important than ever, therefore, to reassert and continue to develop scholarship on queer art and artists.

This volume is a far-reaching collection of scholarship and criticism on queer beauty in Russian and Soviet visual arts. The editors position the book's approach from two main disciplines, Visual Studies and Queer Studies, and feature contributors with backgrounds in both fields. With immense collaborative effort from the authors and translators, the volume confidently treads the often-uneasy ground of cultural mediation; more than half of the contributors write from post-Soviet contexts, and many identify themselves and/or their artwork as somehow queer. This emphasis on authentic Slavic and queer voices preempts the common criticism (and significant pitfall) of queer theory's clumsy application of Western ideas to Slavic contexts. Per Baer and Fiks, "in adopting analytical approaches associated both with Russian/Soviet culture and the West and by bringing together a group of scholars working both in Russia and abroad, the volume hopes to avoid the persistent postcolonial dynamic by which enlightened Western scholars 'explain' Russian culture to Russians" (11).

Fiks further explores the issues of East-West queer discourse in Chapter 14 with his conceptual art piece *Soviet Union, July 1991*, a script for a performance layering 1991 and 2015 public discourse on queer sexuality from both domestic activists and intervening Westerners, confronting the hypocrisies and "good intentions" that continue to reappear in such encounters. In the concluding interview with Fiks (Chapter 20), he responds to a question on the problems of applying terms such as "queer" across cultures by admitting that he feels "suspicious of the bohemian radical queer iconoclastic tradition," in which he sees also the importance of an intersection with class, quipping that "queerness goes out partying on a weeknight after gayness comes home from a ten-hour shift" (381). But,

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grounding the discussion in real consequences, he adds, “it doesn’t matter whether one calls themselves ‘gay’ or ‘queer.’ The real question is: Would one be subjected to prosecution and sentenced under Article 121 [Stalin’s law criminalizing male homosexuality]?” (381).

The problem of language is ever-present in Queer Studies, but despite this volume’s heteroglossia, it remains consistent and coherent. Individual contributors emphasize and explore myriad aspects of the “queer” domain across a broad range of artworks and timeframes, and, like Fiks above, many express nuanced and idiosyncratic understandings of queerness. Baer and Fiks facilitate this discourse with uncommon deftness thanks to their excellent introduction, which glosses important concepts and orients their approach vis-à-vis existing scholarship from adjacent disciplines; the introduction itself deserves praise as an excellent example of how to frame queer analysis clearly and robustly.

One of this volume’s greatest strengths is its breadth. Although some readers may prefer a more focused approach, it seems impossible that someone interested in Queer Studies *or* Slavic Studies (and, as such, anyone likely to be reading this review) could fail to find new and compelling ideas and information in this text. Organizing such diverse topics is, of course, a challenge. Accordingly, this text is divided into loose categories. “Part One: Theoretical Framings” consists of a single chapter by Baer, “Between Semiotics and Phenomenology: The Problem of Queer Beauty,” which follows the brief introduction with a more robust inquiry into the foundational questions and ideas at play in the rest of the volume and offers important historical-cultural context. The long history of queer beauty in Western art necessitates some foundational knowledge of antiquity, which produced fruitful sources of reference for Russian and Soviet artists. Baer cleverly establishes this context while simultaneously expanding upon the theoretical frameworks laid out in the introduction and so avoids the dryness that often plagues preambles of necessary historicization. On its own this chapter is a compelling piece of theoretical writing, but in context it excels by thoroughly initiating the reader into the conversations of the coming chapters.

“Part Two: Queer Beauty in Context” consists of a wide array of critical essays examining engagements with queer beauty from pre- to post-Soviet timeframes. Despite the range of topics covered, these chapters are well organized for reading in sequence; there is a loose chronological ordering, and figures who feature in multiple chapters (such as Georgy Guryanov and Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe) also provide some guiding through-lines for the broader historical narratives. These chapters are the “meat” of the volume, and cover in considerable depth an impressive range of media, themes, and histories.

“Part Three: Beyond Queer Beauty? Contemporary Post-Soviet Perspectives on Queer(ing) Art, Art History, and Artists” begins with two contemporary works of conceptual art. As well as Fiks’s *Soviet Union, July 1991*, the section features a concept piece by Georgy Mamedov and Oksana Shatalova, who use real archival materials to weave an intriguing fictional narrative surrounding an imagined late-seventies queer

commune in Frunze devoted to Kollontai and space travel. This part then moves onto three critical statements by Russian art historians (Victoria Smirnova-Maizel, Seroe Fioletovoe, and Nadia Plungian) concerning the “state of the field” of queer art and art history, and it concludes with three interviews featuring contemporary artists (Masha Godovannaya, Slava Mogutin, and Yevgeniy Fiks). These concluding chapters provide a meaningful reflection on the themes of the preceding chapters, problematizing the limits of language and themes in the open-ended ways so central to Queer Studies. At the same time, Part Three provides a serious forward-looking meditation on the continued development of those themes in the 21st century.

In sum, this volume is a remarkably successful and ambitious achievement—one that provides an excellent model not only for Queer Studies but also for any kind of collaborative, interdisciplinary scholarship. It is by no means an exhaustive text on the topic, nor is it intended to be. Rather, it is a well-structured and thoughtful contribution to the timely and eponymous project of “Queer(ing) Russian Art,” and one that is sure to inspire and inform further scholarship. As the authors note, the book represents not a comprehensive history, but “a first step not only in creating a history of queer Russian art and artists but also, following feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, in imagining queer interventions in art histories” (18).

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Luc Beaudoin, *Lost and Found Voices: Four Gay Male Writers in Exile*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. 264 pp.

This monograph by Luc Beaudoin, Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Denver, explores how the works of Witold Gombrowicz, Valerii Pereleshin, Abdellah Taïa, and Slava Mogutin find their gay voices in exile and express their queerness in a different political, historical, and personal environment. Beaudoin tackles the concepts of queerness and homosexuality, nationalism and masculinity, homophobia, and homonegativity, in the process intertwining his four subjects' stories with his personal experience as a gay man.

Language is the fifth subject of the book, likewise linking the literary quartet analyzed in the monograph. For French-Canadian Beaudoin, "living in an adopted language" is a part of queer exile experience. However, the voices of his heroes have no national or geographic boundaries, just as he navigates French, Polish, Portuguese, and Russian—languages from which many of the translations in the book are his.

Born in Poland, Gombrowicz (1904–69) arrived in Buenos Aires a few days before the outbreak of World War II and decided to remain there upon realizing that it was impossible for him to return home. Writing in Polish for his fellow immigrants, he never declared his homosexuality openly but expressed his true sexual identity in an intimate diary, *Kronos* (2013), which was not intended for publication. Publicly Gombrowicz repeatedly rejected the identity of a gay man. For him homosexuality resided in the fantastic and the unbelievable, mixed with madness and monstrosity. Beaudoin speculates on what implications this ironic absence of homosexual desire had for Gombrowicz's public narrative. Argentina offered Gombrowicz a distinct chance to explore his queer identity, both in public and private spheres, moving back and forth from concealment to expression. This voice, which initially emerged subtly in his early works, ultimately laid the groundwork for a queer existence that thrived independently. It served as a foundation for a compelling critique of obsolete and harmful ideas surrounding nationalism, which Gombrowicz called "the Land of the Fathers."

Pereleshin (1913–92) left Russia with his mother in 1920 for Harbin, China, where he developed both as a poet and as an individual—extraordinarily, becoming a Russian Orthodox hieromonk. Although he realized that he was homosexual, that awareness did not imply a swift, uncomplicated acceptance of being gay. With their life in China increasingly difficult under communist rule, in early 1953 Pereleshin and his mother moved to Rio de Janeiro, where they would spend the rest of their lives. Unlike Gombrowicz, Pereleshin did not leave a diary; his poems function as such. Beaudoin focuses on two of Pereleshin's poetic cycles, both written in Rio de Janeiro, one in Russian and one in Portuguese. The cycle written in Russian, *Ariel* (1976), honors gay love, though from a removed perspective, remaining largely poetic and inspirational without ever being fully realized. Yet it was through Portuguese that Pereleshin overcame the

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constraints he had felt in the Russian language, for the new language mirrored the liberated and sensual world he had entered. In Portuguese he embraced his identity as an openly gay man. In *In Old Wineskins* (1983) Pereleshin struggles with his understanding of being “left-handed,” the term he used for homosexual, and examines the relationship between the physical and the spiritual in a way that was not achievable within the confines of the Russian heritage he maintained throughout his life in Rio de Janeiro.

The Moroccan Taïa (b. 1973) relocated to Paris, a colonial cultural center, rather than to a cultural periphery. His writings, invariably in French, explore the complexities of the queer immigrant experience even as he remains deeply connected to his Islamic religious identity. While identifying as a queer Muslim, he struggles to feel fully accepted in a secular France that acknowledges his homosexuality under certain circumstances but is less accommodating of his religious belief. Beaudoin examines this dynamic in Taïa's auto-fictional novel, *The Slow Life* (2019), asking if one can truly carve out an individual identity in a society that categorizes people regardless of their uniqueness. According to Taïa, while Paris prevents authentic human connections, Morocco hinders the journey of self-discovery and genuine expression. The pursuit of finding one's voice becomes a continual process of mourning for what has been lost, what is currently slipping away, and what may ultimately be lost in the future.

A contemporary of Taïa, the Siberian Mogutin (b. 1974) is a poet, critic, prose writer, photographer, and former film actor. His case illustrates the sexual complexities of Soviet and modern Russian culture vis-à-vis the West (recall the famous statement, “We don't have sex in the USSR”). In 1994, he made headlines with his failed effort to marry his American boyfriend before successfully securing asylum in the United States the following year. Beaudoin examines how Mogutin's body becomes his voice, since for him the body is the only aspect that can stay authentic amidst constant transformation and never-ending consumerism, reflecting how his working-class background and persistent identity influence his artistic expression.

Beaudoin's monograph manages to integrate queer theory with linguistic and visual analysis by showing how queer authors and artists translate themselves for the heteronormative world in various languages and discourses. He is most effective in examining how the intersection of sexual identity and the experience of exile influences the authors' perspectives and narratives, while situating them within their historical contexts. His detailed literary analyses reveal how the necessity of expressing oneself in a different language is closely linked to cultural adaptation in a new country and society. Writers in exile, Beaudoin observes, are often addressing a void, and that is the reason it is important to explore the conflict between speaking and silence. Ultimately, he concludes, gay men and queer people never cease to come out and develop new meanings for themselves, constantly reshaping their sense of self and their surroundings.

Alexandra Lipasova
Independent Scholar

Luc Beaudoin, *Lost and Found Voices: Four Gay Male Writers in Exile*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. 264 pp.

Lost and Found Voices is a remarkable study devoted to Witold Gombrowicz, Valerii Pereleshin, Abdellah Taïa, Slava Mogutin, and their “gay writing in exile.” As such, it contributes simultaneously to Queer Studies, Slavic Studies, and Comparative Literature. At the same time, it is about the book’s author, Luc Beaudoin, and his own queer reading in exile as a French Canadian in an English-speaking queer world, as well as a gay person in a straight society.

In his introduction Beaudoin introduces himself first before the four authors whom he then analyzes. This ordering is indicative of the way the book is constructed, for it is the author who connects the four, not a hypothetical queer common denominator in their writing in exile – nor a gay male one, for that matter, because, as Beaudoin notes, “My use of these terms is purposefully slippery at times. [...] It has to be” (26). He briefly acknowledges that he will be interpreting these writers’ works quite subjectively: “I am a gay man reading these texts, and I interpret them from my experiences, informed by my life as a queer person who lives in a language not his own [...]. In that sense, queer reading includes my own personal observations” (13). Beaudoin, consequently, is the queer lens through which Gombrowicz, Pereleshin, Taïa, and Mogutin become visible as queer authors. This approach offers both great advantages as well as some small disadvantages.

Four chapters, each approximately forty pages in length, dedicated to the designated authors follow: “Witold Gombrowicz: Queer in Plain Sight,” “Valerii Pereleshin: The Left-Hander,” “Abdellah Taïa: The Storyteller,” and “Slava Mogutin: The Sex Rebel.” These units are structured around the protagonists’ respective bodies of work and chart Beaudoin’s personal history as a reader of them.

In the opening chapter on Gombrowicz, who publicly time and again rejected the notion of himself as gay, the borders between interpretation and analysis are blurred. On the one hand, the author expertly shows the possibility of a queer reading of Gombrowicz’ work. At the same time, however, Beaudoin sometimes presents far-reaching conclusions about the Polish author’s inner life that cannot indisputably be drawn from his body of work. He notes that “Gombrowicz [...] was a homosexual” (27), calls his marriage “a substitute that evidently was important emotionally but could not be complete” (37), and states that the author “did not see [women] as wholly constituted beings possibly until his relationship with Rita” (48). In such specific cases, it would have been especially valuable for readers unfamiliar with his methodology had Beaudoin made more explicit that these far-reaching claims are rooted in his specific queer reading—and not straightforwardly deducible from Gombrowicz’ body of work. As it stands, the brief statement at the book’s outset (13) does a lot of heavy lifting. That said, Beaudoin’s queer

reading is often persuasive. When he pairs it with skillful analysis, it becomes especially so as regards the relationship between Gombrowicz' literary form and sexuality.

Different authors, different works, and even different media solicit different approaches. Pereleshin's avenues for expressing his homosexuality, Beaudoin convincingly argues in the next chapter, are closely connected to his Russian-Portuguese bilingualism. His displacement from both Russia and heteronormative frameworks results in a poetics that is intimate, indirect, and linguistically hybrid. Beaudoin's treatment of Pereleshin is attentive to these linguistic nuances and the subtle ways in which queerness is expressed (especially in Pereleshin's Portuguese) or concealed (especially in his Russian).

In the chapter on Taïa, Beaudoin navigates the interplay among autobiography, postcolonial identity, and queer visibility. Here, Beaudoin shows how Taïa's public self-fashioning as an openly gay Arab writer having left Morocco for the metropole cannot be disentangled from his artistic strategies. These are not just literary: Beaudoin delves into Taïa's own film work as well as into film adaptations of his literary oeuvre.

In the next chapter, "Slava Mogutin: The Sex Rebel," Beaudoin engages with another writer, who is not just a literary figure. Beaudoin also focuses on him as a multimedia artist in both (pornographic) film and photography. His treatment of Mogutin is energized by his own fascination with artistic transgression. Resultingly, Beaudoin captures especially well how textual as well as visual provocations speak to queer resistance in post-Soviet contexts.

All these chapters as well as the whole book benefit from Beaudoin's refusal to offer simple categorizations, instead emphasizing fluidity, contradiction, and creative self-invention. The final takeaway may not be a unified theory of queer writing in exile—but then, Beaudoin never promises one. Instead, *Lost and Found Voices* offers readers, both queer and otherwise, something quite compelling: a highly personal account of what it means to read queerly across borders, languages, and histories, paired with a sharp and thoughtful engagement with his four authors and queer literature itself.

Bob Muilwijk
University of Salzburg

Michał Witkowski, *Autobiografia: Tom pierwszy, Wiara: 1975-1990*. Kraków: Znak Literanova, 2023. 496 pp.

Not too long ago, Michał Witkowski's extraordinary literary career was on a downward slide. His 2005 novelistic debut, *Lovetown*—a self-proclaimed “faggot Decameron” about cruising adventures of the communist-era queens—took the Polish literary world by storm, introducing queer sensibilities to the cultural mainstream and making its author an overnight celebrity. Witkowski's subsequent works could not quite top the raw energy of the first novel. Yet, each was a literary event that showcased the author's gift for storytelling and his knack for self-promotion. Together, they comprise what can best be described as a “queer epic of Polish transformation,” arguably the most sustained inquiry into the country's turbulent transition to capitalism in all contemporary fiction. Witkowski's daring publicity stunts were eventually crowned in 2017 with an acting stint in a popular soap opera (peculiarly enough, produced by the public television network run at the time by a virulently homophobic right-wing government), yet by this time his literary stardom was clearly on the wane, as he appeared unable to move past the creative horizon drawn by his most successful works. It did not help that the author increasingly neglected mainstream publishing for the sake of digital patronage and content-provider models that enabled him to capitalize on his dedicated fanbase.

Then came *Autobiography, vol. 1: Faith (hereafter Faith)*, the first book in a planned multi-volume autobiographical project that returned him to the cultural spotlight, though for how long is yet to be seen. The volume owes its existence to a literary streaming experiment, which it is both a product of and an advertisement for. Indeed, the more impatient readers can purchase advance drafts of the forthcoming volumes directly from the author via his Facebook page immediately after putting down the present volume (the “package” includes all hitherto written material and an annual “subscription” to regularly released new content). The volume was met with an enthusiastic critical and readerly reception. In 2024, it was nominated for the Nike Award, Poland's most prestigious literary distinction, and won the Readers' Choice Award in the same competition. Some critics went so far as to compare *Faith* to Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle*, and even to Marcel Proust's opus. It is neither, of course, but that is not necessarily a criticism. On the contrary, it easily counts among Witkowski's most accomplished and accessible works, though with some notable caveats.

The author, a self-proclaimed and self-conscious narcissist, was always at his best when using his literary alter ego as a conduit for his colorful narratives. Here, he clearly relishes the freedom of self-expression afforded by the genre of autobiography. “I can finally speak in my own language, in my own name, about things that interest me,” he boasts in the book's epilogue. However, readers are best advised not to take the author at his word when he declares that his latest book represents “the most existential and direct way of commenting this strangest adventure that happened to us, which we

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conventionally call life.” The book is still very much a part of the author’s self-fashioning project, intricately tied to his oeuvre and public persona. It is perhaps the starkest difference between Witkowski and authors like Knausgård, whose auto-fictional writings intentionally bracket out their present-day consciousness (i.e., knowledge of “where it all leads to”). Unlike his Norwegian counterpart, the author of *Faith* constantly highlights the teleological nature of his story – the emergence of Witkowski the writer and Witkowski the celebrity – and makes repeated references to his works, which is why the book will be best appreciated by readers familiar with his output and self-perpetuated mytho-biography.

This is not to say that others will not find much to enjoy here. *Faith* is filled to the brim with brilliant anecdotes, vignettes, and impressionistic essays, served with the author’s distinct sense of humor and eye for the grotesque. The volume focuses on Witkowski’s childhood and adolescent years, a period framed by his birth and first sexual initiation, respectively. The latter serves as the book’s denouement, to which a large portion of the narrative slowly builds. Of course, the skilled storyteller that he is, Witkowski ends his tale at just the right moment to pique readers’ interest in subsequent volumes. Capitalizing on post-communist nostalgia has always been Witkowski’s hallmark. In *Faith*, the author fleshes out the twilight years of Polish socialism with almost ethnographic attention to detail, recreating the period’s distinct atmosphere through colors, textures, tastes, smells, objects, affects, rituals, and all manner of half-forgotten relics. To the author’s credit, the world emerging from his book is hardly a blissful idyll. Time and again, we confront the darker sides of Poland’s communist utopia—conformity, insincerity, transactionalism, resentment, and violence—that permeated the everyday fabric and easily impressed themselves on a sensitive child like the young Witkowski. Indeed, this is arguably the volume’s central paradox and driving tension: while the author delights in reconstructing the social and sensual aura of the late PRL (People’s Republic of Poland), his narrative follows an emancipatory trajectory that sets its protagonist against the world he so richly invokes in his tale. *Faith* is therefore not so much a nostalgic celebration of the simple joys of life under communism as a coming-of-age story about the formation of a distinct sense of “I”—which includes coming to terms with one’s homosexuality—in a time and place often viewed from the viewpoint of collective experiences.

In that sense, *Faith* shares some interesting parallels with Tomasz Jedrowski’s recent, well-received romance, *Swimming in the Dark* (2020). However, what distinguishes Witkowski’s autobiographical tale from his younger colleague’s Romeo-and-Juliet-style narrative is his specific approach to queer identity, which made *Lovetown* such a controversial proposition back in 2005. Namely, Witkowski ostensibly rejects labels such as “gay” and the emancipatory discourse associated with middle-class values. Instead, he is repeatedly drawn to the abject and dangerous sides of the underground homosexual life in PRL’s twilight years, his depiction of which some progressive critics found borderline homophobic. We get a hint of it in this book and when we follow the author’s sexual initiation leading him to a seedy bar that, his friend points out, is a queer hookup

place. In a rather interesting passage, the present-day author warns his younger, inexperienced self: “My beloved, innocent child, what are you doing? Don’t go there, stop yourself! Don’t you know it’s a dangerous playground, Klondike, gutter? You want to seek love and heath in the gutter? This path leads not to the heath, but to the swamp. It’s easy to get lost” (459). Of course, the book’s protagonist does not heed the warning, partly because of blooming, insatiable desire and partly because without taking such risks, there would be no story worthy of telling and no author to tell it. And that is the point, since for the author of *Faith*, queerness is quintessentially a call to adventure.

One can only hope that *Faith* and most of Witkowski’s output will one day appear in English translation. For those to whom Polish language does not present a barrier, the recommendation is an easy one.

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A Report on “Queering the Russian Nineteenth Century: An International Symposium”

Amherst, Massachusetts, United States, 15 March 2025

On a rainy Saturday, March 15th, a group of scholars from across the U.S. and the U.K., along with faculty and students from around Western Massachusetts, gathered to share their research at the first-ever “Queering the Russian Nineteenth Century” symposium. Hosted and sponsored by the Amherst College Center for Russian Culture, the symposium took place over the course of the day in the Stanley J. Rabinowitz Reading Room, where visitors were surrounded by the Thomas P. Whitney’s collection of rare Russian books, manuscripts, and journals; a prominent display of twelve samovars; and a magnificent view of the Pioneer Valley.

Roman Utkin set the tone for the day by reminding scholars of the origins of queer Slavic Studies through his analysis of Simon Karlinsky’s 1976 *The Sexual Labyrinth of Nikolai Gogol*. Speaking on the subject “When Russian Literature Became Queer,” Utkin reminded attendees of the question at the heart of this symposium: What can Queer Studies bring to Slavic Studies? Mari Jarris proposed an answer to this central question through a camp reading of Nikolay Chernychevsky’s *Chto delat’?*. Jarris argued against the masculinized reading of the text popularized by Lenin, and towards a feminist or queer reading, which recognizes the excess, repetition, and outrageous aspects of the text. Such an approach revealed how the representation of collective labor and gender relations in the novel allowed women to emerge as revolutionary subjects.

Maya Garcia’s analysis of cross-gender casting in Tchaikovsky’s opera *Oprichnik*, particularly in the mezzo vocal range, reminded attendees of the visibility of queerness on stage. Similarly, Ruth Averbach’s paper on “Heterosexual Eroticism and the Work of Aleksandr Aleksandrov” brought trans visibility to the forefront. Averbach’s paper highlighted the uniqueness of Aleksandrov’s position in having his gender officially recognized by the Tsar, and moved on to read Aleksandrov outside of his queerness. She examined how Alexandrov’s transness did not necessarily equate to queerness, complicating the relationship between transness and queerness in the nineteenth century.

In his presentation, Myles Garbarini explored the intersection of friendship and sexuality in Pushkin’s *Evgenii Onegin* and offered a queer reading of Dostoevsky’s *Netochka Nezvanova*. Garbarini’s analysis highlighted how both texts blur the boundaries between platonic and romantic affection and can be read and interpreted from a queer perspective. In a similar vein, Brett Donohoe, the moderator and organizer of the symposium, presented a paper on depictions of homosexuality in Pushkin’s and Dmitrii Oznobishin’s emulations of classical Persian poetry, focusing on how themes of pederasty and queerness were adapted and reimagined within the context of Russian

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Golden Age literature. He explored how Pushkin's engagement with orientalized motifs complicated contemporary understandings of sexuality and cultural identity.

Two presenters explored the legal regulation of gay relationships in Imperial Russia. Maria Mayofis reported on her findings concerning a specific investigation by the Third Section, initiated in late 1837 to early 1838, which uncovered regulations of homosexual relations by members of the political police. According to her archival research, these relationships were not prosecuted as standalone offenses, but only in connection with other crimes. Having traveled from the UK to Amherst College specifically for the symposium, Olga Petri, a geographer, presented her research on how queer male inhabitants of fin-de-siècle Imperial Saint Petersburg experienced urban environments and spaces. Drawing closely on archival materials, Petri emphasized the role of the *nomernaia bania*—public bathhouses that offered private bathing spaces by the hour—which created spatial opportunities for queer encounters in the city.

As members of the Russian Studies community, attendees shared that the symposium felt like a breath of fresh air, bringing together new perspectives in the field. The symposium provided an opportunity to engage with and exchange innovative readings of canonical texts. Encouragingly, symposia focused on queer Slavic Studies are becoming more and more common, with recent gatherings at Princeton, Columbia, and Oxford reflecting the growing interest and visibility of this field. We sincerely hope that this event marks the beginning of a new tradition at Amherst College—one that not only continues to center queer scholarship but also expands to include research on the women's rights movements that emerged in the nineteenth century, as well as highlighting voices of scholars currently in exile due to political censorship in Russian academia. The symposium was a credit to its organizers and was made possible by the joint efforts of Brett Donohoe and Catherine Ciepiela, the Director of the Amherst College Center for Russian Culture. We thank them for convening the symposium and facilitating the participation of all the speakers.

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