



Голубой/-ая Literature
and Russian Holiness¹

Голубая literatura
in ruska svetost

In a short reflection, we are dealing with the issue of Russian LGBT culture. In understanding literature and LGBT culture in Russia, we come from the ambivalent attitude of the Russians to the Law. From the beginnings of the Russian state, homosexuality was, by law or canon law strictly forbidden. But in reality there was a lost of homosexuality and it was tolerated. We proceed from the assumption: if God's Word is holy, everything written in fiction is also sacred – the book is the bearer of truth and beauty. There is no room for talk about homosexuality. Apart from smaller, masked homosexual deviations in Lermontov, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky or Chekhov, even writing about homosexuality is considered a sin. Why is this so?

LGBT AND RUSSIAN CULTURE,
GAY LITERATURE, RUSSIAN
MESSIANISM, RUSSIAN HOLINESS

V kratkem razmišljanju se ukvarjamo z vprašanjem ruske LGBT kulture. Ob razumevanju književnost in LGBT kultura v Rusiji izhajamo iz ambivalentnega odnosa Rusov do Zakona. Že od začetkov ruske države je bila namreč homoseksualnost z zakonom oz. kanonskim pravom strogo prepovedana. Dejansko pa je bilo homoseksualnosti veliko in so jo tolerirali. Izhajamo iz predpostavke: če je Božja beseda sveta, je sveto tudi vse, kar je zapisano v leposlovju – knjiga je nosilka resnice in lepote. V njej ni prostora za govor o homoseksualnosti. Razen manjših, zamaskiranih homoseksualnih odstopov pri Lermontovu, Gogolju, Tolstoju, Dostojevskem ali Čehovu, je že pisati o homoseksualnosti greh. Zakaj je temu tako?

LGBT IN RUSKA KULTURA,
GEJEVSKA LITERATURA, RUSKI
MESIJANIZEM, RUSKA SVETOST

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Годубой is a colloquial expression for the same sex oriented person.

It is interesting that even until today there are no studies of homosexual culture and literature in Russia, although in the western world there are now many research centers dealing with the issue of LGBT culture. Unlike the special study courses in Western universities, in Russia, this topic is still a taboo. A step back was made with law adopted in 2013 for the ban of the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations in the midst of minors (закон запрещающий пропаганду нетрадиционных сексуальных отношений среди несовершеннолетних). It has launched numerous condemnations of liberal-thinking people both outside and in Russia itself. Consequently, the ban imposed fears on members of the LGBT community and put Russia back to the time when darkness ruled. The question poses itself: why is this so?

This reflection on the situation of the LGBT community and its literature will be an overview but at the same time also a polemic one. I will be questioning the causes for the formation or in fact the absence of erotic and consequently homoerotic / homosexual discourse. I will continue with a consideration of the meaning of LGBT literature in Russian culture in general. I will be using the term homo erotic and homosexual discourse as synonyms.

In Russia, there is actually little discussion about homosexual literature; in principle, at the universities there is no possibility of studying LGBT culture as a special discipline, i.e. queer studies. The only reliable source about LGBT in Russia are activists around the internet portal gay.ru.

Information on homosexual literature (especially contemporary) can thus be obtained only from direct contacts with the representatives of LGBT community or from western studies dedicated to Russian LGBT culture. Once very popular amongst homosexual population, *Kvir* magazine (since 2003), can today only be found on the internet. Some *queer*

data are still available on other websites (usually work of enthusiasts), but by far the most scientifically competent are western sources that have had direct contact with Russian LGBT culture and systematically researched it. In the following, I will therefore point out three important authors that I find relevant to highlighting LGBT culture: Kevin Moss, who edited the work entitled *Out of the Blue: Russia's Hidden Gay Literature* from 1997. Within this collection, attention should be paid to the contribution of Simon Karlinsky *Russia's Gay Literature and History*. There is also Denis LeBlanc with his work *Slavic sins of the flesh: food sex and carnal appetite in the 19th century Russian fiction* from 2009.

Today, Russian and Western sources state that Russian LGBT culture is under threat, its representatives are exposed to ridicule, some are rightfully afraid for their lives. This fact is also confirmed by one of the most prominent LGBT activists Dmitry Kuzmin.

The current situation is not only the present-days fault of mostly homophobic Russian society, but also the general expression of the Russian cultural model. I will try to highlight this specificity. An interesting starting point for this research is offered by Ronald Denis LeBlanc in his work *Slavic Sins of the Flesh*. LeBlanc mentions the Russian religious philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, a representative of metaphysical idealism. By focusing on Berdjaev, LeBlanc speaks of the innate spirituality of the Russian man, and this reflection is important for the understanding of Russian mentality: the absence of “physical” means abstinence from the temptations of the material, and thus of all the physical, related to sexuality.

In Russian culture the notions of the values of spiritual are connected to the word of God, in the name of whom Russian soil is being christianised since the 11th century. Cultural histories foreground that the Russian man is accustomed to follow the Word of God as the

only wright truth: hence the difference between the words of justice (правда) – the logical truth, and the truth (истина) – God given truth. It is logical then to infer that the word in Russian culture has the value of Truth. After the fall of Rome and Byzantium, the idea of Moscow as the third Rome, which preserves the wright word, creates the original doctrine and true faith in God – that is Orthodoxy (Православие).

Based on faith in the Word, a double perception is formed, which is a characteristic of the Russian mentality: on the one hand, there is faith in the pure and the true Word, on the other, lust (плоть), which is according to the biblical representation sin: a Russian man suppresses the carnal lust, is still being sinful, but cannot even write about it. Infront of him there is only heaven for saints or hell for the sinners, the Orthodox Bible does not know the place where a man can be cleansed (чистилище) – the Russian mentality does not know the purgatory. The Russian man is thus torn between extremes: on the one hand the sin, the work of the Antichrist, on the other, the Word as the carrier of truth and beauty, God's extasy. The word about carnal lust, sexuality, let alone homosexuality, is forbidden.

It is understandable that the dominant authority (consequently, the tzar, who is the embodiement of God on earth) feels a calling to preserve the value of the Word and spiritual morality. Regardless of the social order, this mentality applies to the present days: Soviet leadership or the putinism of today's time are similar to the religious doctrine in the preservation of purity.

Art plays an important role all periods, as it represents the continuity of the word of God, which is also the word of authority. Therefore, there is no place for bodily activity in the times when religious or state art (classicism) is being born: physicality leads to sin. The perceptual notions of flesh, eroticism and sex remain and exist only in the lower

genre, in folk literature or in folklore. The duality between high and profane can thus be manifested only in the rich erotic-sexual lexicon of folk literature.

If the boundary between high and low is strictly set – and in a strict biblical opposition, which does not know the purgatory (cleansing place), the erotic discourse cannot even be developed in sacred, beautiful literature (belletres).

The first attempts of erotic motives and, consequently, erotic discourse in high literature developed from the transition from normative to descriptive poetics – that is, on the transition from classicism to romanticism, in times when, regardless of the still dominant meaning of God's Word, the focus of personal experience is on the forefront.

Of course, this does not in any way mean that it would now be possible to speak freely and without reservation of the sexuality of high, ruling classes in the *elite* literature – and, consequently, of their homosexual experiences, such as, for example, Ivan Grozny or Peter the Great were having – about eroticism and sexual experiences is now spoken by the poet himself in low, usually comic genres. The unexpected carnality (in the motives of homosexuality) is being either masked (as with Gogol), or portrayed as humorous as in Lermont's (Junker Poem).

The most explicit *carnality* was expressed by the greatest Russian poet Alexander Pushkin in *Secret Notes*, which are considered one of the best (male) manuals of women's sexuality. In his Notes, it is especially interesting how Pushkin, as a declared heterosexual, liberally accepted homosexuality. He had a friend Philippe Vigel, an open homosexual, with whom he exchanged letters during his exile to the south. In one of the letters, he adds a witty song, how three nice boys are waiting for him in Chisinau, and at the same time inviting the addressee to visit him on the condition that he (Vigel) will not touch him:

Не знаю, придут ли к тебе
 Под вечер милых три красавца;
 Однако ж кое-как, мой друг,
 Лишь только будет мне досуг,
 Являются я перед тобою;
 Тебе служить я буду рад
 Стихами, прозой, всей душою,
 Но, Вигель, — пощади мой зад!

Given the strict commitment to the Word in Russian society, it is interesting that literary history coined a term for this romantic period of individual sensation, called Golden era of Russian literature (*Золотой век русской литературы*). This would be then some kind of *contradictio in adjecto*.

The observer of Russian culture should therefore not be surprised that the second period, characterized by the liberation of moral and legal issues, was called with the related term: the Silver Age. Another kind of contradiction. This is a period of new romanticism, symbolism, for a time when European decadence spills into Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. At that time literature with open homoerotic motivation appears. Let me mention some important representatives: Marina Cvetaeva, Mihail Kuzmin, Sofija Parnok, Sergey Jesenin and Fjodor Sologub with extremely obscene descriptions of sexuality...

Following the reflection on the development of (homo)erotic discourse, we must stop at the historical avant-garde, which coincides with the aforementioned modernist movements. Regardless of its declarative denial of the past, and therefore also of the Silver Age, in the time of avant-garde-isms, life continues in search of various possibilities that bring about the liberation. Their experiments were not only

technological, philosophical and artistic, but also searched for different coexistence: a special attention should be paid to the triangle: Vladimir Mayakovsky, as the central poet of the October Revolution, Osip Brik, as an important formalist, and his spouse Lili Brik.

In order to understand Russian mentality and Russian (homo)sexual discourse, it is most important to know, that after the October Revolution in Russia, homosexuality was legalized and tolerated: the time of the early and late avant-garde, ending by the end of the 1920s, is considered one of the most ideally pluralistic periods in Russian culture.

But this freedom also has its other side, since this is also the time of social revolutions, which an academically educated intellectual elite expected with fear. In all this time, from the February Revolution of 1905 to October 1917, one can speak of the already proverbial hesitancy of Russian intellectual elite, which is insightfully portrayed in the writings of modern Russian writer Viktor Yerofeyev: in fear of normative ties intelligentsia did not play a more important role in order to bring about the flourishing society, but with the increasing Stalinist totalitarianism, new / old norms have been removed: the law, the authority and the word were now embodied by Joseph V. Stalin. The consequences are clear: erotic and homoerotic or sexual discourse is prohibited by decree. In the conception of a state machine, there is no room for any sensual pleasures. The national norm intervenes in the field of private and there are open pressures on the same-sex population: important homosexual artists (including world-renowned director Sergei Eisenstein) must consent to marriage with the opposite sex; if not they are threatened to be imprisoned in concentration camp (GULAG).

While at the end of the 19th century Berdjaev talked about the spirituality of the Russian man, any spirituality that did not conform to the party's vision was forbidden in the Soviet Union. Even the thought

of individual freedom from the times of the Golden and the Silver Age of man could lead to a violent party re-education. The repressive apparatus did not extend to the spiritual field alone, but also developed the old normative idea of the physicality linked up with sinful sexuality. Communist doctrine of oppression transferred (Homo)erotic discourse to the margins of culture. The body as the object of desire is replaced, in the Stalinist propaganda, by a physically enduring, muscular body that, if I paraphrase Stalin, is merely a screw in the body of the state / machinery: from here arises – similar to a Nazi propaganda machine – also in the Stalinist cult of the chiselled like body, which is clearly visible on posters – a man as a woman’s body becomes a public good and is in no way linked to sexuality. This understanding changes into a paradigm that exists as an unwritten law until the times of glasnost and Gorbachev’s perestroika in the 1980s.

In this regard, today there is proverbial statement, which in the first steps of the opening of the Soviet Union to the world in 1986 a Russian woman given to the question of an American journalist: in the USSR there is no sex at all (в СССР секса нет). This answer is symptomatic. If the basis for an average American advertising posters is an erotic-sexual hint, in the Soviet propaganda, the uncovered male and female body is connected only with the idea of a steel worker with a featureless face, a heroic look, shining in a bright future. Sexuality is hidden in the public, of course, but this does not mean that it doesn’t exist. This became clearly evident after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Hence, in the development of society the period of the glasnost and the pluralism of the nineties, the Soviet iconography is replaced, and (homo) erotic or, (homo) sexual discourse is reborn. It appears in so called the подпольная / underground literature (named so after F. Dostoevsky), this now receiving the name the other literature or the

so called new wave. It is full of obscene sexual scenes related to juicy curses, which until then were known only to folk literature. We are witnessing a cultural explosion (for which the Russian semiotician Mikhail Lotman used the term *взрыв*). Once forbidden erotic themes move from the periphery of culture to the center. Homosexual motives also penetrate to literature. But this is not a literature that would shed light to life, relationships and mentality of the members of the LGBT community. In principle this is just a procedure for shock therapy of a Soviet man. The effect is understandable: used to established artistic and literary norms the post-Soviet man distanced himself from the shocking descriptions of sexuality as something that has a traditional connection with the antichrist and is related to sin. Many cases of this kind of shock therapy that were only harmful the LGBT community are found today in the works of important contemporary writers: Eduard Limonov, Vladimir Sorokin, Viktor Yerofeyev. We must accept this shock therapy as an occurrence of schizoanalytic postmodernism, which brings to the surface the suppressed part of the cultural unconscious, and as a result arouses the feeling of disgust in the readers. This is a carnivalisation process, when the suppressed now becomes visible in canonised literature, but it still does not mean a qualitative stage in the development of (homo) erotic discourse. Postmodernist Russian literature does not deal in depth with the questions of the body, and therefore also not with sexuality and homosexuality as an integral part of Russian culture and society. It is clear that (homo) erotic and brutal motives are merely a procedure by which literature is unmasking something that is prohibited, but in fact it only strenghtens its prohibition. Therefore it becomes understandable that the (homo) erotic discourse in Russia cannot become the subject of scientific treatment, since such discourse is too foreign to the academic study of Beautiful.

Of course, this does not mean that there was no other LGBT literature during the (post) Soviet period. But such literature is still only on the periphery, as an expression of marginality. When homosexual writers at the time of the SU – for example, Gennady Trifonov or Yevgeny Kharitonov – tried to develop (homo) erotic and sexual discourse in literature, this was considered in public per definition as obscene. Censorship watched their work closely, and the authors had to remove or mask homosexual love testimonies. With the exception of Kharitonov, who was regarded as a promising homoerotic author (he is even nominated by some people as a Russian gay icon), in today's Russia it was not possible to develop a homoerotic discourse in literature that would be worth mentioning as the subject of Russian scholarly research.

It is commendable that some modern creators (eg Dmitry Kuzmin, Jaroslav Mogutin) try to include in so called elite literature is a homosexual motives and stylistic expression of the sensibility of the marginalized community at the level of established, publicly recognized literature. Unfortunately, these experiments remain on the margins and can not penetrate to the center.

Periods of relative freedom, paradoxically attributed to them by the names of the Golden and the Silver Era, often bind to periods of chaos and confusion (smut) in the historical performance when the future is not clear and plurality raises doubts about so called bright future, which again speaks of the flutter and fear of the elite or center. The reaction is foreseeable: after the periods of the Golden and the Silver Age, it seems a good to limit the freedom of all the different (and thus the LGBT community) that don't subordinate to the center.

Obviously, the ruling elite in today's Russia has become aware of the dangers of over-freedom in time: in 2013 it adopted the law on so called

prohibition of homosexual propaganda, and some later on the legal ban on the use of curses in public and in literature.

The period that awaits Russian society is exclusive and xenophobic to all marginal cultures and can not be in favor of LGBT literature, since rooted deep in Russian mentality, this is still deeply committed to the Word of God and to the Beauty of the Language: The Word is still sacred and there is no room for it sin. ❖

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Povzetek

Zanimivo je, da se vse do današnjega časa v Rusiji ne pojavljajo raziskave homoseksualne kulture in literature, čeprav je v zahodnem svetu danes že kar nekaj raziskovalnih centrov, ki se ukvarjajo z vprašanjem LGBT kulture. Za razliko od posebnih smeri študija na posameznih univerzah zahoda je v Rusiji omenjena tematika še vedno tabu. Korak nazaj je prinesel leta 2013 sprejet o prepovedi propagande netradicionalnih seksualnih odnosov sredi mladoletnikov (закон запрещающий пропаганду нетрадиционных сексуальных отношений среди несовершеннолетних). Tako zunaj Rusije kot v sami Rusiji je med svobodomiselnimi ljudmi sprožil številne obsodbe. Posledično je prepoved vnesla strah me pripadnike LGBT skupnosti in Rusijo ponovno potisnila v čas, ko je vladalo mračnjaštvo. Vprašanje se postavlja samo po sebi: zakaj je temu tako?

Pri razmerju književnost in LGBT kultura v Rusiji, je treba izhajati iz ambivalentnega odnosa Rusov do Zakona. Že od začetkov ruske države je bila homoseksualnost z zakonom oz. kanonskim pravom strogo prepovedana. Dejansko pa je bilo homoseksualnosti veliko in so jo tolerirali.

A če je Božja beseda sveta, je sveto tudi vse, kar je zapisano v leposlovju – knjiga je nosilka resnice in lepote. V njej ni prostora za govor o homoseksualnosti. Razen manjših, zamaskiranih homoseksualnih odstopov pri Lermontovu, Gogolju, Tolstoju, Dostojevskem ali Čehovu, je že pisati o homoseksualnosti greh. *Prepoved* traja do konca 19. stoletja, do obdobja dekadence in simbolizma. V tem času igra pomembno vlogo Vasilij Rozanov s prvimi teoretskimi razpravami o homoseksualnosti v ruski kulturi. To je čas prvega *coming-out* ruskih pisateljev: najpomembnejšo sled v lezbični literaturi zapusti Marina Cvetajeva,

v gejevski Mihail Kuzmin. Simbolistični pesnik Kuzmin se v svoji zadnji pesniški zbirki *Postrv razbija led* (1928) odmakne od vseh literarnih konvencij in njegovi nastopi v javnosti pomenijo prvo promocijo gejevske kulture v Rusiji. Stalinistični totalitarizem v tridesetih letih, ki sledi še vedno dialogičnemu postoktobrskemu obdobju, pokoplje vsakršen up: v sovjetski literaturi je (homo)seksualnost spet tabu. Ruski konceptualizem ob koncu sovjetskega imperija prične to idejo ponovno rušiti. V literaturi se spet pojavijo prizori homoseksualnosti (Eduard Limonov) in v devetdesetih letih se porodijo literarni poskusi razviti homoseksualne teme (Jevgenij Haritonov). Tudi to upanje zamre v obdobju vladanja Vladimirja Putina. Ob pritiskih pravoslavne cerkve vse bolj narašča homofobija in ponovno uzakonja ponavljajočo se idejo: Beseda je vendar sveta.

Miha Javornik

Miha Javornik is a full professor at the Department of Slavic Studies at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, where he lectures on modern and contemporary Russian literature, and literary theory. He is specialised in the history of contemporary Russian literature and cultures. His work is centred on the notions such as mythology in literary and socio-political history, and the contemporary phenomena of the information age, for instance the nature of identity in digital communication.