

## Tolstoj and Symbolic Castration: On Love and Death in Russian fin-de- siècle Culture

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Love and death seem traditionally to be inextricably bound together in Russian culture. The idea that Eros encompasses Thanatos has been an active part of Russian intellectual, psychological and religious mentality. In this way a unity between love and death is established, a unity in which carnal desire at the same time becomes a desire for destruction. Pleasure and pain are one and the same thing, as the poet Aleksandr Blok puts it.<sup>1</sup> The other side of sexuality is always suffering and decay. In this perspective erotic passion becomes ambiguous, since it not only leads to sexual gratification, but also to human loss.

The ambivalent relation between love and death has not least been thematized by the author Lev Tolstoj. In the texts of his so-called second period, from 1880 until his death in 1910, this is one of the major topics. Tolstoj's focus on the deathly potential of eroticism is related to the deep crisis he experiences around 1880, a crisis resulting in a drastic break with all his earlier values. This crisis leads the author to dissociate himself from his entire literary production before 1879, including great novels like *Anna Karenina* and *War and*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. Blok, "Roza i krest" ("The Rose and the Cross"), Moscow. Leningrad 1961, *Sobranie sochinenij v vos'mi tomakh*, vol. 4, p. 271.

*Peace (Vojna i mir)*. During the last thirty years of his life, Tolstoj tries to communicate a completely different ideology. This ideology is also known as Tolstoyism, that is, a rationalized, moralistic Christianity devoid of all mystical and miraculous aspects.

For our purposes, however, it is most interesting that Tolstoj's new position involves a break with his previous positive evaluation of the family: In his earlier works, family life (that is, legal family life) is seen as a protection against the dark destructive forces of existence. In the texts after 1880 we observe that the family becomes problematic, since it is connected to sex, which he now radically rejects. Instead Tolstoj argues for a total repudiation of all sexuality, whether marital or extramarital. His reason for taking this standpoint is that the sexual drive threatens the inner integrity of the individual, leading away from the moral voice Tolstoj believes inhabits our inner universe. This moral and divine voice is never more distant than during the sexual act. In such moments our spiritual ego dies and the animal nature takes over, he claims, with clear reference to a well-known Christian-platonic dichotomy between the ideal and the empirical ego. For the mature Tolstoj nothing was more traumatic, nothing more animalistic, nothing more deadly for our moral self than sexual intercourse, which he expressed himself in the following way: "Human beings must suffer earthquakes, epidemics, the most horrible diseases and all sorts of agony, but the greatest tragedy in human life has been, is and always will be the tragedy of the bedroom."<sup>2</sup>

In a work like "The Kreutzer Sonata" (Krejcerova sonata) from 1889, the tragedy of the bedroom emerges with the greatest urgency: Here we see precisely how married life, conjugal eroticism, brings the fictive married couple to moral

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. Gor'kij, "Literaturnye portrety. Lev Tolstoj" ("Reminiscences of Tolstoj"), *Izbrannye proizvedenija v trekh tomakh*, Moscow 1972, vol. 3, p. 311.

decay and finally to violent death: The story ends with the main character brutally killing his wife in an attack of sexual jealousy, making the connection between erotic lust and annihilation perfectly clear. When one surrenders to passion, one is actually embracing Death or the Devil, as a well-known text from this period will have it ("D'javol," 1889). Sexual love is always synonymous with destruction and results in the loss of the subject, whether this has concrete expression in gruesome murders as in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, or whether it must be conceived of in a more spiritual manner.

The author's negative view of sex leads, naturally, to a negative view of the cycle of reproduction. Children, often considered a positive image of the uninterrupted continuation of life, become in Tolstoj an image of human mortality. For the author the child becomes in a certain sense a premonition of death, reminiscent of the speculations of the philosopher Nikolaj Fedorov (1829-1903).<sup>3</sup> The child is like a wormeaten fruit, a product of the perverting power of sexuality and a confirmation that the human being occupies a world of moral sin.

In Tolstoj's second period we see how birth and offspring are linked to the infernal and children die in a striking way in his works. This is noticeable especially in a late work like *Resurrection* (*Voskresenie*) from 1899. In this novel the portrayal of sexual relations is presented in very dark tones. Significantly, it is intimated that fertilization itself is a moment marked by death, like an infection by a deathly contagion. Similarly, pregnancy is associated with something ominous and sinister. The main character, Count Nekhljudov, who has gradually become more and more ascetic, typically makes the

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Fedorov's work *Filosofia obschego dela* (*The Philosophy of the Common Task*, 1906, 1913). Here he claims that the resurrection of our dead ancestors is a task more important to mankind than the production of children, thereby arguing for a discontinuation of the reproductive process.

following disgusted reflection with regard to his sister: "And each time he heard she was pregnant he felt like condoling with her for again having been infected with something evil."<sup>4</sup>

For (the late) Tolstoj the seed of our perishability lies in the coming into existence of the child. Every birth is an outer expression of our ties to bondage and the realm of necessity, a painful manifestation of our raw and animalistic sides having killed our spiritual ego. In order to avoid being entangled in moral death human beings must strive for absolute abstinence, no matter how difficult this demand might seem. In Tolstoj's poetic formulation, the ideal of chastity is the compass and the star by which people must navigate during their journey on the open sea of life.<sup>5</sup> For the author it does not constitute a problem that humanity would die out if reproduction were to come to a halt. To voluntarily abstain from having offspring is rather a sign that humanity had reached its perfect state. As such it would have realized its highest potential, and the natural consequence would be that it ceased to exist.<sup>6</sup>

In his late period Tolstoj defends asexual marriages as an arena of liberty for both women and men. His idealization of chastity seems however to be based on clichéd conceptions, a conventional fear of women as a threat to men's spiritual being. We can therefore speak of a striking ambivalence in his view of sexual abstinence: On the one hand this should contribute to emancipating the woman from the repressive circle of sexuality, realizing her spiritual potential. On the other hand the author's assumptions were based on well-

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<sup>4</sup> L. Tolstoj, *Resurrection*, London 1966, p. 405 (all subsequent quotations from the novel will be quoted directly in the text from this translation).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. L. Tolstoj, "Posleslovie k 'Krejcerovoj sonate'" ("Afterword to 'The Kreutzer Sonata'"), *Sobranie sochinenij v dvadcati tomakh*, vol. 12, Moscow 1964, p. 226.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. L. Tolstoj, "Krejcerova sonata," where a good example of this type of argumentation can be found ("The Kreutzer Sonata," *Sobranie sochinenij*, vol. 12, p. 157).

known prejudices about sex and gender, which I will briefly comment on.

For Tolstoj women were frightening because they, unlike men, do not act on what he refers to as "the dictates of their reason" (512). In contrast to men, they are emotional and closer to the instinctual life, that is, the so-called "abominable animal nature of man" (390). This animalistic sensuality gives them what he considers a "detestable power" (390). Women, in Tolstoj's account, cynically take advantage of this power, which is especially dangerous because it is both alluring and repulsive at the same time. From this perspective the body of a woman becomes a temple of perversion, a hotbed of all kinds of raw and self-indulgent inclinations. Her physical attributes, her bodily grace and beauty are transformed to depraved and demonic phenomena. This demonization is clearly seen in the anxious relation of the previously mentioned Count Nechljudov to his deceased mother. In particular this becomes evident in his ambiguous feelings for his mother's portrait, feelings which seem to originate in Oedipal-incestuous wishes: "She was" (writes Tolstoj):

wearing a low-cut gown of black velvet. The artist had evidently taken great pains over the modelling of the bosom, and the shadow between the breasts, and the dazzlingly beautiful shoulders and neck. This was absolutely disgraceful and disgusting. There was something revolting and profane in this representation of his mother as a half-naked beauty [...] 'How disgusting!' he said to himself again, looking up at the half-naked woman with her superb marble shoulders and arms [...] 'Disgraceful and disgusting, disgusting and disgraceful' (138).

As Tolstoj presents her, woman is reduced to a sexual manipulator who, through a set of conscious and unconscious strategies, endangers man's spiritual purity. Through

Nechljudov's reflections, which in many respects clearly are concurrent with the author's, a primitive fear of woman as the negative other emerges: Not only for the prostitute, thinks the Count, but also for the upper class woman "the smiles held the same meaning" (390). The aristocratic woman

pretends that she has no such thought in her mind [...] whereas at bottom they're the same. [The prostitute] at least is truthful: the other one lies. Besides, the [prostitute] has been driven to the straits by necessity, while the other amuses herself playing with the enchanting, revolting and dreadful passion. The streetwalker is like filthy stinking water to be offered only to those whose thirst overcomes their aversion; but the [so called respectable] woman is like a virus imperceptibly poisoning everything it touches (391).

According to Tolstoj it is the female Eros that activates the sexual mechanisms. The origin of sexuality is always in the woman: She is the one who initiates the almost infernal sexual processes by way of her licentious sexual instincts, her innate erotic power being the cause behind all perverted and abnormal sexual behavior on the part of the man. In the light of such assumptions, Tolstoj's attempt to liberate woman from the yoke of sexuality is put in an ambiguous perspective: There is much to suggest that the author's emancipation project only formulates and rehabilitates traditional misogynous conceptions of female sexuality: In a woman's embrace is concealed the death of man.

Symptomatically, the women who are appreciated in Tolstoj are those who suppress their sexual nature. Only through virginity can woman be of value. By rejecting her sexual sides she creates a sphere of activity where she can develop into a true individual. Highly characteristic for these idealized women is their intense loathing for erotic relations: for them sexual love becomes something "repugnant and

offensive to human dignity" (473). Since sex is by definition "offensive," we must understand it as a deviation from a worthy and moral human existence, an anomaly or abnormality one must try to deny. Each individual must undergo a process of purification, a desexualizing cleansing, and the task of humanity is to fight against nature, to bridle instinctive impulses by cultivating them through a conscious and disciplined abstinence.

Taking into account Tolstoj's strong anxiety for everything carnal, it is not surprising that he presents the asexual fellowship of monasticism as an ideal. Women can approach this ideal through a nunlike, chaste mentality in which their feminine aspects are annulled in favor of a neutral personality. Through such ascetic strivings they may escape from their gender and avoid the destructive polarization between the sexes. Men can undertake a similar negation of their sexual identity, and be transformed to sexually neutral beings through a corresponding ascetic-monastic way of life. As becomes evident, this is a way of life in line with the norms of chastity in the hagiographic tradition.

Asceticism is thus an important message in the late Tolstoj. In a period marking the transition to modernity, the author reactivates in a rather idiosyncratic manner early Christianity's hostile attitudes toward the flesh. We recognize in his program the first Christians' argumentation for the imminent end of this world, their rejection of everything having to do with sexuality, and their fear for the uncontrollable sides of the female body, even though these early Christian ideas now are freed from their original religious references. The result in Tolstoj is a blindness to the fact that erotic love can encompass elements of tenderness, friendship and spirituality. This blindness could also be a problematic legacy from early Christianity, especially from the influential patriarch Augustine. The Augustinian distrust of the body created in Christian culture what Peter Brown has called "a

darkened humanism."<sup>7</sup> There is much to indicate that Tolstoj shows traces of such a dark and twisted humanism with respect to sex and gender.

Although Tolstoj can be said to represent a specific re-vitalization of the renunciation of the body, so characteristic of early Christianity and later monasticism, in his view of sexuality he is at the same time deeply rooted in a living and contemporary Russian tradition. Through his drastic negation of all sexual life Tolstoj can namely be seen as a representative for a certain spiritual *skopetstvo*, which could be translated into English as spiritual castration. Thus he situates himself in a peculiarly Russian cultural context, which I would like to elaborate a little further:

As I have emphasized, sexuality in the traditional Russian mentality seems to be identified with death. Perhaps this acute anxiety for everything carnal is connected to Eastern Christianity's strong bend toward asceticism. In parts of the Eastern church there is an almost gnostic aversion to matter, a radical distinction between spirit and body, where the life of the body is related to a demonic dimension. Such ideas are especially clear in the Russian sects. The first of these sects is established at the end of the 1600's, as a protest against reforms in official orthodoxy. These sectarian peasants lived completely on the periphery of established institutions. To a conspicuous degree their belief was concentrated on sexual life as an obstacle to individual salvation, and reproduction in particular was considered an evil because it chains us to this vale of tears. They strived therefore, like the first Christians, toward ending the generic process of birth and procreation. Only by preventing the begetting of children could death paradoxically be conquered.

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<sup>7</sup> P. Brown, *The Body and Society Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York 1988, p. 426.



In the different sects various ceremonies and rituals take the role of the holy scripture, which is thus superseded by concrete rites and practices. Sometimes we see that strict abstinence and rigid asceticism could be broken by periods of licentious orgies, often of homoerotic character, that is, a form of sexuality not leading to offspring. But more often than not the goal is a total renunciation of all sexual life, based on the idea of the sex drive as the source of moral destruction. A well-known group are the so-called Khlysty (the flagellants), who like the flagellants of the middle ages whipped themselves to exhaustion in order to drive evil desires out of their bodies. They beat themselves, we are told, with iron chains and the blunt end of an ax, they slashed themselves with knives and they hit themselves with heavy balls, while reciting pious prayers to Jesus.<sup>8</sup> They saw themselves as successors of Christ, and preferred to be called Khristy (Christs) rather than Khlysty, their exalted self-tormenting being a desperate attempt to imitate the Bible's asexual, celibate Savior.

Their self-tormenting did not, however, always have the desired effect. It was observed that, far from suppressing desire, the cultic mass whipping could lead to desires being reignited and degenerating into wild orgiastic rituals. Consequently they searched for other, more effective strategies for subduing the flesh, and thus the Skoptsy or castrates originated, a sectarian movement which came into existence at the end of the 1700's. For the Skoptsy whipping was no longer a sufficient means against sexuality and its fatal implications. Self-castration became, in all its frightening efficiency, the only

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. A. Etkind, *Sodom i psikhea. Ocherki intellektual'noj istorii Serebrjanogo veka (Sodom and Psyche. An Essay on Intellectual History of The Silver Age)*, Moscow 1996, p. 31ff.

truly lasting solution, the only sure path to the realm of immortality.<sup>9</sup>

Tales of the castration ceremony relate that the cultic surgery was performed with a cutting instrument or a red-hot iron, in other words, a sort of baptism by fire. Through this baptism the newly initiated or neophyte is led into his new existence, into the mystery society. The fact that such horrible rites were possible at all is connected to the belief that external sexual attributes were the dwelling places of death and the devil. The testicles were thus considered the keys to hell, while the penis was the key to the abyss.<sup>10</sup> By removing these body parts, one could follow the words of Jesus and enter into his world. As it is written in the gospel according to Matthew (19:12): "and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake."

The Skoptsy often emphasized how light they felt after castration. A burden was gone and they moved like flying, heavenly beings. For example, one Skoptsy expressed it in this manner, in an attempt to convert a traveler visiting his village: "Uncle! It is much too heavy for you to carry, you must castrate yourself. Being a castrate is so good, it makes it so easy to walk..."<sup>11</sup> Similar ways of speaking are used by the very first Skoptsy, in 1769, when trying to convince his son to undergo the cleansing baptism: "Don't be afraid, my son, you will not die, but your soul will rise again, and all will be easy and joyful. You will fly as on wings, the spirit will take its abode in you, and your soul will become new."<sup>12</sup>

This should indicate that the individual, when it rids itself of external sexual attributes, ceases to be touched by the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91ff. On the Skoptsy, see also A. Etkind, "Russkie skoptcy: opyt istorii" ("The Russian Skoptsy: Attempt at a History"), *Zvezda* 4 (1995).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. C. Millot, *Horsexe. Essai sur le transsexualisme*, Paris 1983, p. 87.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. A. Etkind, *Sodom i psikhea*, p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 77.

animalistic sexual struggle and becomes a free creature. In this respect we have a movement from sexual difference to radical indifference. Through this sexual indifference the spiritual ego is offered a new chance, a new resurrection. This new human being belongs neither to the one sex or the other; it can perhaps be understood as a kind of asexual neuter gender. Important role models for the Skoptsy were typically the chaste and sexually ambiguous angels of the Bible, and the archangel Michael, who according to Revelations (12:7) bridled the dragon or the old serpent, became a guiding light for their lives. In line with such ideals it was common, as a conclusion to the cultic castration, to display the amputated genitals and say: "See the subdued serpent!"<sup>13</sup> After being thus subdued, the sectarian was back in what was thought to be a primordial, childlike, and asexual state. Liberated from desire, light and wonderful, the previous man has created for himself a new universe, cleansed of women and sexuality.

Despite the resolute use of the knife and the brutal mutilation that their rites involved, the Skoptsy rapidly gained many adherents. Also among the female members of the sect one hears of ritual sexual mutilation, so-called female circumcision or clitoridectomy, often, and grotesquely enough, in a combination with the removing of one or both breasts. Through this drastic act the woman's body takes on a more neutral (or more masculine) look, whilst the breasts, that is, the place that provides the newborn baby with food, are destroyed. Thereby the woman's function in the reproductive cycle is weakened.

Many perverse tales circulated about this type of cultic surgery: One of them tells how the woman's breasts after amputation were cut into small pieces, which were then served to the congregation like the wafer during holy communion, in other words a perverse travesty of the orthodox bread-

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. C. Millot, *Horsexe. Essai sur le transsexualisme*, p. 87.

breaking sacrament.<sup>14</sup> Such extreme forms say a lot about the deep traumas connected to sexuality in the Russian tradition. The fear of the death which lurks in the embrace of passion seems to have marked the Russians' mentality and character in a decisive way. The poet Vasilij Rozanov (1856–1919), who wanted to create an alternative to what he called the hysterical and hyperbolic asceticism of Russian culture, once put it like this: "The terrible Skoptsy spirit, the rejection of the flesh, has suppressed the Russian people with a force that the West can have no understanding of."<sup>15</sup>

At the end of the 1800's and the beginning of the 1900's, in the Russian fin-de-siècle culture, issues related to eroticism and death were of vital interest for intellectuals and artists. The very same problems that dominated the sects thereby became a central part of the discourse of Russian modernism, this period being fundamentally colored by the sectarians' experiences and conceptions about sex. However, what the illiterate, primitive Skoptsy quickly solved with a cut of the knife, the intellectual elite try to solve through various theoretical strategies. For them sexual mutilation is not a concrete reality, but is rather conceived of metaphorically. Castration takes on symbolic forms, allowing us to speak of an internalization of the Skoptsy's brutal, external techniques. As mentioned earlier, a good example of this is the late Tolstoj. Through a symbolic or mental castration he rejects the destructive circle of sexual life in order to assure the purity and salvation of his soul.

The Russian symbolists, the generation of poets who appeared from the 1890's on, were likewise affected by the Skoptsy legacy. Even though the solutions found by the "decadent" and refined symbolists were different from

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. A. Etkind, *Sodom i psikhea*, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> V. Rozanov, *Russkaja cerkov' i drugie stat'i* (The Russian Church and other Articles), Paris 1906, p. 8.

Tolstoj's rigid moralism, they are still driven by the same "Skoptsyian" ambivalence toward sex. Besides, for literary symbolism the contemporary European sexual debate also became important: in particular, impulses from Otto Weininger's book *Geschlecht und Charakter* from 1903. Weininger's thesis, that all higher spirituality is bound to masculine traits, while the woman is the locus of the low sexuality, is a line of thought that was well known from the Russian tradition.

In addition Nietzsche's theory of the dionysian and the apollonian had a significant impact on Russian culture. The dionysian and the apollonian are usually considered as two forces which are in an interactive relation to one another. In Russia they were most often considered as one force, as an indivisible union, as two apparitions of the same basic phenomenon. Cosmos and chaos are ambiguously tied to each other. Every beginning is at the same time its own destruction. In the apollonian form there is already the dionysian dissolution, and the dionysian will always determine the relation. Dionysius is dangerous in Russia, it was claimed, with an eye to the Russians' intense attraction to the destructive aspects of life, intoxication and sex.<sup>16</sup> Interpreted in this way, Nietzsche could contribute to supporting the familiar conception that death lives in every new birth, in every new becoming.

In the Russian turn of the century atmosphere we notice a rebirth of the so-called neo-sectarianism. Here themes with a basis in the life and belief of the sects were elaborated on, such as in Andrej Belyj's novel *The Silver Dove* (Serebrjannyj golub') from 1908 (*dove* was incidentally another name for Skoptsy). The Skoptsy's ideal, the sexually neutral individual, is however transformed in the hands of the symbolists into the androgynous individual. This androgynous culture involves at the same time a specific marginalization of heterosexual love, leading to a traditional devaluation of female sexuality. In the

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. A. Etkind, *Sodom i psikhea*, p. 232. See also Vja. Ivanov, *Po zvezdam* (Following the Stars), St. Petersburg 1909, p. 327ff.

symbolists' texts and theories we find an unusually clear divide between the woman as madonna and whore, and it is the woman as madonna, as spirit and ideal, that we see exalted. The other side of the ideal, the erotic, sexually active woman, the fascinating seductress, is connected with the underworld, chaos and death.

For the development of the symbolists' bisexual theories, the neoplatonian philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev (1853–1900) is important. Symptomatic for his negative view of traditional sexual life is his conception of men's sexual intercourse with women as necrophilia.<sup>17</sup> He thus implies an analogy or a similarity between sex and death. The lethal Eros, who forces people to reproduce themselves like soulless animals, can only be conquered through androgyny. Through once again becoming one sex, we avoid the scourge of sexuality, the demonic urge for sex and the other.

Similar androgynous thoughts were developed by Nikolaj Berdjaev (1874–1948), who regarded the bisexual individual as the only really divine one. Berdjaev's metaphysical hope is that human beings someday will liberate themselves from the sexual act, from death and birth. Art and the creative life will in the future conquer sexuality. A new order will be established in which the ambivalent relation between love and death is elevated to a model of harmony.<sup>18</sup> In these utopian thoughts we recognize Tolstoj and the Skoptsy's longing for the end of humanity in its present form. However, it is unclear how Berdjaev actually imagines this asexualized society or this new paradise.

In Russian symbolism one can claim that androgyny becomes a central cultural ideal. It is still important to emphasize that this highly speculative, androgynous striving

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. V. Solov'ev, *Sochinenija (Works)*, Moscow 1988, vol. 2, p. 527.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. N. Berdjaev, "Smysl tvorčestva" ("The Meaning of Creation"), *Sobranie sočinenij*, Paris 1989, vol. 2, pp. 216-240.

was not (primarily) directed toward man's union with woman as a bodily, reproductive creature. It is on the contrary the spiritual, sophiological dimension of the female that is brought forth, that is, woman as a representative for divine holy wisdom, Hagia Sofia. Man as Logos is united with woman as Sofia in an asexual androgynous structure. Not surprisingly in this hermaphroditic tradition Christ becomes a paradigm of the androgynous personality. The idea of Christ's ideal bisexual nature was in general strong in symbolism, and it is a theme that recurs again and again. In the symbolist literature the Christ figure is depicted as extremely ambiguous, an enigmatic synthesis of male and female traits, as we see in Aleksandr Blok's famous poem "The Twelve" (Dvenadcat') from 1918.<sup>19</sup>

The turn of the century attempts to rework the issues concerning gender, sex and death have a further repercussion in the Russian literary avant-garde from 1910 on. Here the symbolists anxious relation to sex, birth and reproduction surfaces in an almost shocking way, as in the revolutionary poet Vladimir Majakovskij. When in one of his texts he exclaims "I love to watch when children die" (Я люблю смотреть как умирают дети) we find the same attitude toward offspring as observed in the spiritual Skoptsy Tolstoj.<sup>20</sup> Children are really an expression of the end of life. They call forth associations to one's own mortality, and therefore it is pleasing to Majakovskij every time this fountain of death dries out. The unity

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. L. Helle, "Blok and Akhmatova: From Carnavalesque Resurrection to Symbolic Crucifixion," K. Grimstad & I. Lunde, *Celebrating Creativity. Essays in Honour of Jostein Børtnes*, Bergen 1997, p. 260ff.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the poem "Neskol'ko slov obo mne samom" ("Some words about myself") from 1913. Cf. also R. Jakobson who explicitly thematizes Majakovskij's aversion toward children ("O pokolenij, rastrativshchem svoikh poetov" ["On a Generation that squandered its Poets"], *Selected Writings*, The Hague. Paris New York, vol. V, p. 369ff).

between the life instinct and destruction, between creation and downfall, can hardly be expressed more provokingly. In cases like this, "a darkened humanism" or a twisted humanism has gained ground also among the Russian revolutionary elite.

As we have argued, in Russian culture we can speak of an intertwining of love and death, in which the urge of the flesh is always an urge toward destruction. Destruction and creativity are two facets of the same principle. This "Russian" idea can in an intriguing manner have contributed to the development of psychoanalysis in Europe through the Jewish-Russian psychoanalyst Sabina Spielrein, who was a student of (and for a time the lover of) Carl Gustav Jung. Spielrein develops in her work "Die Destruktion als Ursach des Werdens" from 1912 a "stirb und werde" model in which destruction becomes pregnant with creation.<sup>21</sup> She thus comes close to a certain instinctual monism, where the death instinct is seen as an aspect of the life instinct. Freud, who for a while was Spielrein's advisor, received decisive impulses from her works on the death instinct. In his book *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920) he worked out his own version of this, the doctrine of Thanatos, at the same time as he admits in a footnote, Spielrein had anticipated essential ideas concerning the death instinct.<sup>22</sup> In Freud, however, these ideas are transformed into an instinctual dualism, where the death instinct becomes an equally fundamental force in human life as the instinct toward life and love. But Thanatos and Eros (or libido) remain two independent forces standing in a varying relation of tension to one another. Consequently it cannot be said that Freud has continued Spielrein's insistence on creation

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. S. Spielrein, "Die Destruktion als Ursach des Werdens," *Jahrbuch für psychoanalytische und psychopatologische Forschungen* 4 (1912), pp. 465-503.

<sup>22</sup> Cf.: "In einer inhalts- und gedankenreichen [...] Arbeit hat Sabine Spielrein ein ganzes Stück dieser Spekulation vorweggenommen" (S. Freud, "Jenseits des Lustprinzips," *Werkausgabe in zwei Bänden*, Frankfurt am Main 1978, vol. 1, p. 219).



and death as two sides of the same basic phenomenon, a way of thinking deeply anchored in Russian religious and intellectual tradition. The ambiguity so characteristic for the Russian mentality is thus lacking in Freud's interpretation. Perhaps it is precisely this ambivalent and "Russian" aspect Freud alludes to when he, in spite of his admission of his debt to Spielrein, emphasizes that her theories still "are not completely comprehensible" for him ("für mich leider nicht ganz durchsichtige").<sup>23</sup>

Moreover Freud's solution to the problem of sexuality is also quite different from the one found in the Russian cultural context we have examined. What Freud wants is to liberate human beings from the angst connected to sexual life. This leads him to a reappraisal of the natural and to a battle against culture's suppressing of the instinctual. What we have discussed in this paper about the ascetic Skoptsyan spirit in Russian tradition, indicates that we here have to do with a completely contrary project: The extreme anxiety here connected to the body and to sexuality results in a radical sexual asceticism. The inherent coupling of love to destruction can only be done away with by subduing our animalistic nature and cultivating it through rigid, disciplined techniques. The death which is hidden in the embrace of Eros is so dangerous for the moral existence of human beings that only sexual mutilation can be an effective counterstrategy: Only through castration (whether it is physical or spiritual in nature) can we disrupt the instinctual cycle and fly as pure angels into the realm of freedom.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

