CHAPTER ONE

CARNALITY AND EROTICISM IN THE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE: TOWARD A GENEALOGY OF A DISCOURSE OF SILENCE

Zakhar Pavlovich had been sitting with Sasha at the railway station for the whole 24 hours waiting for a troop train going Sasha’s way and had smoked three pounds of low-grade tobacco, not to be too nervous. They had spoken about everything, except love. It was about love that Zakhar Pavlovich said these warning words in an ashamed voice, “You are a grown-up boy already, Sasha, you know it all by yourself… The main thing is that you shouldn’t do this business on purpose—this is the most deceptive thing: there is nothing in it but it is as if you were drawn somewhere, as though you wanted something… Any man has the whole imperialism sitting in his bottom part (в нижнем месте целый империализм сидит)…” Aleksandr couldn’t feel any imperialism in his body.

Andrei Platonov. Chevengur, a Novel (1929).

The main argument of this chapter is built around the observation that Russian literary culture is short of the necessary discursive resources for discussing sexualities and eroticism. Sexual behavior is presented in dominant literary and social discourses most often as a pathology or aberration that can only be burlesqued or represented as grotesqueries, often of a brutal and repulsive nature. To pursue the consequences of this lack, I will attempt in this chapter to outline a genealogy of what I have termed a discourse, or a figure, of silence as it evolved throughout Russia’s cultural and intellectual history. This canvas will reach from the crucial progenitor Emperor Julian through the “founding father” Archpriest Avvakum to the Silver Age period of Russian culture and literature (1890–1921) that saw the unprecedented interaction between the predominantly sectarian narod (common people, peasantry), and secular but intellectually curious intelligentsia and part of the nobility, and finally to the emergence of such crucial thinkers as Vasilii Rozanov and scandalous “mystics from the

1 Чевенгур 77–8. All translations from the Russian are mine unless otherwise marked.
people” like Grigorii Rasputin. Aiming to illustrate this thesis of a lack of discourses for sexuality and eroticism using literary examples, subsequent chapters will offer a survey of numerous specific works of nineteenth-century and modern Russian literature.

For everyday life situations in Russian-language cultures, this utter inability to articulate themes of eroticism and sexuality in a meaningful way is responsible for a number of cultural predicaments and idiosyncrasies. One such idiosyncrasy is that the cultural weight of literature remains very high in Russian culture, and thus one should not underestimate its role in shaping the outlooks of the people who are sexually active now, including the ways they think and talk about sex. When appropriate discourses are missing from that literature, in consequence, the public sphere will itself be shaped in particular ways to compensate for it.

The main study question for a comparative philologist and/or a sociologist of literature interested in the Russian tradition is this: why does this particular discourse of silence dominate in Russian letters, and how is the representation of sexuality therein similar and different to that of the other (e.g., Francophone or Anglophone) literary traditions? Despite the obvious fact that, with regard to sexual matters, all Western cultures (whether we include Russia in those or not) have always taken up discourses of sexuality in rather controversial ways, the question of degree remains: i.e., to what degree is one able to render artistic and cultural production and consumption relatively more receptive and open to human

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2 Aleksandr Etkind notes the “programming influence of literature” in Russia (Содом и Песня 329), while Joseph Stalin, following Yuri Olesha, aptly called Soviet writers инженеры человеческих душ / “engineers of human souls.” Dmitrii Galkovsky calls the Bolshevik/Soviet rule графократия / “graphocracy”—literally, the rule of writers (Galkovsky 365). And, conversely, he thinks that the development of Russian literature has never been an immanently “literary process” as it “has always with professional complaisance fulfilled certain social demands and has never been therefore something explicable mainly ‘within itself’. The laws of literary development in Russia were not literary laws” (Ibid. 78). When I talk about the relatively high “cultural weight” of literature in Russia, I imply this special status of creative writing and writers in Russian culture.

3 Indeed, Western observers were sometimes shocked by the amount and scope of (quasi)pornographic literature, film and other media that had flooded the republics of the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s up until the late 1990s. But maybe the immense marketability and popularity of such periodicals as Playboy and Spid-Info in Russia can be in part explained by the reading public experiencing a deficit of “serious” erotic writing and thus having to resort to racy publications and not always tasteful pieces of advice on sexual matters that one can find in sex tabloids and men’s magazines. For detailed discussions of erotic media and presumed limitations of erotic literature in Russia, see, for example, articles by Masha Gessen “Sex in Media and the Birth of the Sex Media in Russia” or Karen Ryan “Misreading Misogyny: The Allegorical Functions of Russian Porn.”